



## Episode 347: African and African American Music

[00:00:00] **Announcer:** You're listening to an AirWave Media podcast.

[00:00:04] **Liz Covart:** *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of the Omohundro Institute and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Hello and welcome to episode 347 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present-day world we live in. And I'm your host Liz Covart. It's impossible to overstate the importance of African and African American music to the United States' musical traditions. In fact, Steven Lewis, a curator of music and performing arts at the Smithsonian, notes that, quote: "Describing the African-American influence on American music in all of its glory and variety is an intimidating—if not impossible—task. African-American influences are so fundamental to American music that there would be no American music without them," end quote. African and African American music has indelibly shaped the musical landscape of the United States. So given the importance of African and African American rhythms, beats, instruments, and songs in both early America and in our modern time, I decided to make this last episode in our five episode series on music in early America, an episode about African and African American music.

Jon Bebe, a jazz pianist, professional musician, and an interpretive ranger at the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park will lead us on an exploration of how and why African rhythms and beats came to play such important roles in the musical history and musical evolution of the United States. Now as we explore the history of African and African American music in early America and beyond, Jon reveals the origins of New Orleans music and why and how New Orleans developed into a musical hub for colonial America and the United States, how the everyday life activities of enslaved Africans and African Americans influenced the creation of new songs and musical genres, and how and when African American music went mainstream throughout the United States. But first, thanks to our friends at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park you will hear music and musical clips throughout this episode. Other pieces of music came from copyright-free sources or, in the case of a very brief clip of Fats Domino, was used under fair use for education. For a full listing of all the music we used in this episode, visit the show notes page, [benfranklinsworld.com/347](http://benfranklinsworld.com/347). Okay, are you ready to dive into the history of African and African American music in early America and the United States? Let's go meet our expert guide.

Our guest is an interpretive ranger at the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, a national park dedicated to celebrating the origins and evolution of America's most widely recognized indigenous musical artform. In addition to being an expert on the history of jazz, our guest is also a jazz musician and plays the piano. Before joining the National Park Service, our guest served



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twenty years as a musician in both the United States Marine Corps and the United States Navy. Welcome to *Ben Franklin's World*, Jon Bebe.

[00:03:32] **Jon Bebe:** Well, it's great to be here. Thanks for having me.

[00:03:34] **Liz Covart:** Well Jon, we're going to talk a lot about African and African American music today and about its influences on music within what is now the United States. And I wonder if we could begin our conversation with the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park. Would you tell us about this national park and its origins?

[00:03:52] **Jon Bebe:** The New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, which is located in the French Quarter, right? New Orleans, was established to celebrate the origins and evolution of America's most widely recognized indigenous musical artform, which you have stated so eloquently in your question. It's a story rich with innovation, experimentation, controversy, emotion, politics, cultural effects. They all play a part in the creation of jazz. And we talk about all this with our ranger talks and also through music in New Orleans.

[00:04:23] **Liz Covart:** What is the connection between New Orleans and jazz? I mean, when many of us think of jazz, we do think of New Orleans. So how did New Orleans become a place that we associate with jazz?

[00:04:33] **Jon Bebe:** Right. Well, it all is going to come together through various points of context that kind of coalesce. And I like to think of it like as a jazz gumbo, if you will. You're going to have a mixture of the blues. You're going to have a mixture of the rhythms that are coming from Western Africa. You're going to have classical music, opera that's played from the 1700s all the way into the mid-1800s. So you're going to have classical musicians. You're going to have the rhythms and early music from Ireland, Germany, France, Spain, England, all comings, coalesce in New Orleans to create the music that what we now call traditional New Orleans music, but it was the beginnings of jazz.

[00:05:19] **Liz Covart:** Now, a few moments ago, we both mentioned how the National Park Service promotes the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park as a place that celebrates the origins and evolutions of America's most widely recognized indigenous musical artform. Jon, would you tell us how and why jazz is considered an indigenous musical artform?

[00:05:40] **Jon Bebe:** Well, certainly. It goes along with what I was just talking about. So indigenous music was created there within New Orleans. Indigenous to that space. So you really have to go back to when the French first settled there and they created the Code Noir, which is the black code, which lays out sixty-five different articles of how the colony is going to roll. It



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was created for the French colonies in the Caribbean and then adapted into New Orleans. One of the major influences within this code, one of the articles, was that Sunday was a day of rest, a day off for everybody, including the enslaved. So this is going to be one of the points that's going to separate New Orleans from the other British-run colonies that are in the South.

The Africans, the enslaved, were allowed to practice some of their culture on those days off. They were allowed to gather in drum circles, they were allowed to dance, they were allowed to play music. They were allowed to do all of these things, which was unheard of under the British rule and the British colonies. So that is one of the points that's going to help create this context for this music to develop and become jazz eventually.

[00:06:52] **Liz Covart:** So it sounds like it was really colonial New Orleans's legal system—it's French legal system, the Code Noir—that allowed for a certain degree of cultural freedom that we just don't see in English and British North America.

[00:07:03] **Jon Bebe:** Very much so. Even though the Code Noir was still brutal, I mean they still had that if you were an escaped enslaved person, the first time you escaped it would brand you with the *fleur-de-lis* on one shoulder. The second time, they would actually cut your earlobes off. The third time they would cut your hamstrings, and that was in the Code Noir, so it was still a brutal factsheet. But it was less brutal than the British who had the option of killing you right away if you did that. So it's a horrible part in the history of our country, but it did allow for these rhythms and this culture to come into New Orleans and set the groundwork for this beautiful music that is going to develop and come to life right in Orleans.

[00:07:49] **Liz Covart:** Well, let's dig into some of this vibrant musical history. Jon, what did African music, the music that the enslaved people brought with them to New Orleans and to North America, sound like, and what was the impact of this music on early American musical culture?

[00:08:04] **Jon Bebe:** Well, we do know that there are certain instruments that came straight from Africa, such as the banjo, which is going to make a great impact in North America. They also had flutes. They also made trumps out of elephant tusks. They had the precursor to the vibraphone. So they'd had all these musical instruments and they also had specific rhythms. Now, the pipeline to New Orleans—from Western Africa to New Orleans or from Western Africa to the Caribbean—was basically the same. It was the Senegambia region, and then later on Congo. And one rhythm that was extremely important to the development of the music that's going to be here was called the bamboula. Now the bamboula, it's a very simple rhythm. It's a syncopated rhythm. And for those who are listening, who are saying, "what's syncopation?" Well, it's a rhythm that has both accents, a downbeat and an upbeat or an offbeat. So like if you're in marching band and your foot hits the ground, those are those downbeats, and when your foot's



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off the ground, that's an upbeat. So in this rhythm, it's going to accent both of them. And what it does is going to make it very danceable, makes it lively.

So this bamboula rhythm, I will demonstrate, you guys can listen. It's, uh, very simple. It's the first part of a 3–2 clave, if you're down with Latin music. So it goes like bam-bou-la, bam-bou-la, bam-bou-la, bam-bou-la. And it just keeps repeating like that. And that's going to lay that kind of foundational groove that music is going to grow on. You can go through the history of New Orleans music and hear this rhythm all the way from the mid-1800s even into the early rock and roll in the 1950s, Fats Domino, "I'm Walkin',"

[Recording of Fats Domino, "I'm Walkin'."]

That bamboula rhythm is part of that. If you go into the 1960s with, uh, say Professor Longhair who's playing piano, some of his greatest hits like "Junco Partner" and such. Bamboula rhythm is driving force in that. If you go to modern day, they had a TV show, about oh, fifteen or so years ago, on HBO called *Treme*. They wrote an original theme song for it. It's the bamboula. The whole thing is a bamboula. So it just shows you how important that rhythm is and how it's stayed and how it's keeping that groove. I like to tell everyone as they come to the park that if you go and hear a brass band playing out in the street, nine times out of the ten that tuba player is playing that bamboula rhythm to get that groove rolling.

[00:10:36] **Liz Covart:** Music is an aspect of culture that can really take on and perform a lot of different acts for culture. So I wonder if we know anything about the role music played in the Senegambia region of Africa that would prove so important to the development of music in New Orleans, North America, and even the present-day United States?

[00:10:59] **Jon Bebe:** Well, it was a major part of their culture and their social interaction, was with these drum circles with the singing. Music was where they would come together and celebrate life. And without this, you go through the daily routines of what you were doing. But the come-togetherness of how they lived was with these drum circles and the celebration of the music. And the music there in Africa, Western Africa, the concept's a little bit different.

Like when we think of like a musical concert, you know? It's like we're looking at the band, they have a start and to finish. You know, it's very definitive, you know, like classical music and such. With these drum circles and the style of music, it just starts grooving, and there's really no beginning and end. I mean, there obviously is, or else they'll be playing forever, but it's just more of you keep adding in elements and it just keeps expanding and you just become part of it. It is a more phenomenon, so the audience becomes part of the music and it just keeps engaging, engaging. And then the dancers play off the rhythms of the drums and the instruments, and it just kind of coalesces into a thing that becomes greater than the parts.



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[00:12:07] **Liz Covart:** We've learned from other historians that we've had on this podcast that the international slave trade, the transatlantic slave trade, really picked up during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it brought forth a massive diaspora from Africa to the Americas and the Caribbean. So Jon, I'm curious how music made its way from the Senegambia region of Africa to the Americas and the Caribbean because I really can't imagine these slave traders, from everything we've heard about them, allowing newly enslaved Africans to bring their banjos and their drums and their elephant tusk trumpets with them on the middle passage.

[00:12:44] **Jon Bebe:** No, that's very correct. They were much too large, and especially under British rule, they weren't allowed to bring anything at all. Under French rule, they could bring stuff that was small, more like the flutes and those kind of things, but they also had the capability of making the drums when they came into America. But this only happened in the New Orleans region. Under British rule, it was very strict and uh, the only thing they could do was sing while they were working, which, if they were singing while they were working, that means that they were working, right? And there was no talking that goes under both rules, French and British. Talking, you were punished because talking meant you were not working. But under French rule, it was encouraged that they could create their instruments, that they could perform, they could play. They wanted them to be as happy as possible, being taken from their land and placed into servitude. That's a big difference between the French and the British as well.

The British, there was no playing, there was no dice, there was no culture. They were trying to squash that and they treated the enslaved as, really, commodity and not human at all. Whereas the French, even though it's still enslavement, they did allow the culture to stay alive.

[00:13:58] **Liz Covart:** When you described music in the Senegambia region of Africa, you discussed how music was really important to the cultural life of different African peoples, and that music was really meant to help these peoples celebrate life. Did the role of music change for Africans who had been enslaved and then brought to the Americas and the Caribbean and forced to labor? Did music still serve as that celebration of life?

[00:14:23] **Jon Bebe:** Oh, it definitely did. And this is going to be the development of a new type of music that's going to happen on the plantations. And this is going to start with what we call "field hollas". So think of holler, but H-O-L-L-A, holla. And that's just like letting that emotion from inside out. It doesn't have to be words, it can just be, you know, those feelings that are coming out. And the Smithsonian has some great recordings of these that you can find on YouTube and such, that they actually had the capability of recording turn of century. So it's going to go through a little bit of evolution. So you're going to be singing while you're working, you have the field hollas, and it's going to develop into call-and-response. And call-and-responses, I mean, we have this in everyday life. I was in the Marines. We did a lot of call-and-response.



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[Recording of call-and-response music.]

But they also use call in response to pass messages along the plantation fields, where they could talk and code right underneath the plantation bosses' noses, so to speak. That was their communication method while they were working. The other thing that where they get rhythm into, say, the cart with those big wheels that are turning, that would set the motion for the rhythm as well. So you're going to have that kind of more of a slow groove, and then later on you're going to get grooves from trains. So everyday life is going to play an important role within the music that they have going on, as well. Call-and-response, eventually you're going to develop work songs. Work songs are about work, right? But not only work, they're also about everyday life. You'd have work songs about, you know, breakfast and the food you're eating, everyday things in life can be work songs.

[Recording of a work song.]

Work songs have no chordal progression. They're just a groove. So when I say "chordal progression," I mean the chords change. And also work songs, there's no definitive third, which makes a song major or minor. So if you have a triad, and for those nonmusical people out there, everything's based off of scales. And to make a triad, you take the first, the third, the fifth note of a scale and that third note, if you play like a C-major scale—so C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C—so it's E, that's a major scale. If you lower that E a half step, then you have a minor triad. Minor triad, major triad. So work songs have no third in them. There's no major third, no minor, third, they just are a groove. So if you're listening to early rock and roll, what they call "bar chords," that's the same concept there, too. So you don't know if it's major or minor, basically.

From work songs it's then going to develop into spirituals on one side and then the blues on the other. And then this is where chordal progressions are going to come in. And there's three basic chords that's going to be in a blue song. It's going to be, chords are going to be based off the first note, the fourth note, and the fifth note of that scale. And, historically speaking, in a blues song, this is the first time where you're going to have a melody that's going to have a minor third in the melody over major chords. In classical music it's either major or minor. So this is very historical in the overall scope of music that this is going to take place in the song, the blues, because they're going to bend the notes down for majors to the minor third and the development on the plantation fields by the enslaved. They are the ones who are going to make this happen.

Now, going to spirituals, I forgot to mention that that Code Noir, everyone had to be Catholic, so everyone had to be baptized. If you weren't baptized, the enslaved were taken away from that plantation owner and sold to somebody else. So religion is going to start playing a big part in the enslaved as well as everyone else in New Orleans. So the spirituals are going to develop in that same kind of mode. They're going to be bluesy as well, but they're going to have those religious





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overtones. And then the spirituals are where they're going to put their hidden messages in to tell their stories. Because obviously they weren't allowed to write anything down or even learn to write, for the most part. So that's where they're going to talk about like the song "Wade In the Water." That one's pretty much on the nose. You want to wade in the water so you can lose the scent of the hounds that are following you.

[Recording of "Wade in the Water."]

There's also spirituals about following the North Star that describe the Underground Railroad. All sorts of little hidden messages and texts within these spirituals that were passed down from generations. So this music is all thriving and bubbling and growing on the plantation fields surrounding the cities, pretty much in the Tri-Delta area down here.

[00:19:47] **Liz Covart:** So music wasn't just a cultural art form, it was actually a really practical form of communication, a way to get messages to others and express your emotions and document your [00:20:00] histories.

[00:20:01] **Jon Bebe:** Oh yes, for sure. Not being allowed to write or learn how to write or have any methodology to write anything down. It was how they would tell their stories, was through song. They obviously told stories, too, but this is a way that they could remember them and pass them down and really spread those words. Interestingly, they also had songs that they would sing in their native language, and this would only happen in the French colonies. But they would sing about how they were going to kill their master, but they would be like happier songs, so the plantation owner wouldn't know what they're talking about. And they were just like, if they're singing, they're happy. But the reality was that they wanted to escape. If they could do harm to the slave owner, they would want to, was the natural part of the evolution of enslavement. And it's just that part of life. I always try to get people to picture yourself taken out of your home, put into another country where you don't speak the language and people are brutal to you. It's crazy. It really dehumanizes you as a person.

[00:21:02] **Liz Covart:** Earlier we mentioned how in Africa there were musical instruments, like banjos, drums, flutes, and trumpets, and how in some instances, especially when the French were involved, the enslaved were able to take these smaller instruments, like small flutes, with them along the middle passage. But Jon, how did Africans and later African Americans make new versions of these bigger instruments like banjos and drums once they had arrived in the Americas? How did they recreate this aspect of their African culture?

[00:21:32] **Jon Bebe:** Well, it depended on what job they have within their enslavement. There were lumberjacks in the surrounding areas, there was a lot of cypress trees, so they were allowed to take part of those trees and create the drums out of them. So they could relive their culture and



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have it going on. And this was actually encouraged by the status quo, by the establishment, I guess you could say. Getting back to those Sundays when they had those days off, they were allowed to gather in small places, the most famous one being Congo [ Square, which is actually going to start small, but by the end of it, in the 1800s, you're going to have five to six hundred enslaved and also free people of color that are gathering in Congo Square and celebrating life and playing music, and also being allowed to have a flea market and selling wears as well.

An interesting side note with this is that the city would be setting the price of the enslaved, not the slave owner themselves in New Orleans. So the enslaved could actually save up money if they—so on those Sundays, what they would go out and work for somebody else, they would get paid and then they could hopefully save up enough money and purchase their freedom. And this is one of the reasons why New Orleans has the most free people of color in the South, you know, growing up through this time period. And the free people of color, who were enslaved or their ancestors were enslaved, they're going to bring that music and keep celebrating it, and it's going to thrive because of all of these aspects.

They also want to make banjos and those kind of things from everyday tools in life. It's a famous picture. There's a bucket, it's like a broomstick, and it has three strings on it, and the broomstick sticking in the bucket. That would create the reverb and the resonance of the sound. So you could create these makeshift instruments to capture the sound if you didn't have the exact tools to make, you know, the very nice musical instruments that we see today.

[00:23:21] **Liz Covart:** So music played a big role in African and African American leisure lives, just as it played an important role in their work lives.

[00:23:29] **Jon Bebe:** Oh, for sure. Later on, there's going to be the social and pleasure clubs that are designed for free people of color, musicians in general, who were very poor and it was all set up to make sure that they would have a funeral at the end of their life. That was the main reason why these clubs would take place at first. And this is also going to be the beginning of the jazz funerals. So they wanted to set apart or give an honorarium to these musicians that would play in the city and give some of themselves to the culture and the surrounding people at the end of their lives as well. Because, you know, believe it or not, being a musician in the 1800s, turn of the century, 1900s, you didn't make any money. It was a very hard life. It wasn't like today where if you're a top musician, that you're making enough money to live comfortably. It wasn't like that at all. You were scraping by. A lot of the top musicians were still playing on the streets. They're still playing for tips. So it's a very difficult life. And you're also, you know, a lot of the places you're playing are the nefarious places, the red-light districts, the bars, the brothels, the barrel rooms, and such. So it's a lifestyle that your parents don't want you to aspire to, you know, later on as well either. You know, you kind of have to have that musical drive within you that you want to do that, and you want to capture that spirit.





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[00:24:47] **Liz Covart:** Now, we've been fairly focused on the musical culture of colonial New Orleans because it was such a vibrant culture, especially in early America and even beyond that time period. But we know that slavery existed everywhere in what is now the United States until about 1800. And that's when we start to see individual states abolishing the practice. Jon, do you know if any regional differences developed in African American music between the so-called free states and slave states, and if regional differences did develop could you tell us about those differences?

[00:25:22] **Jon Bebe:** The expansion of music from New Orleans is going to happen a little bit later. It's going to be around the 1920s, so much later than the beginning of the 1800s. Though the music from the free people of color, no matter where they were, they would always have that capability and possibility of enriching the surrounding areas. But all the different ingredients that happened in New Orleans was the main reason why jazz got created down here. So you're going to have more of what they were bringing from their ancestors and learned. So you're going to have more of, uh, one note in an ensemble of notes. Does that make sense? It's not going to have the, uh, color of all of these different flavors within it up north or under British rule, too, a lot of it was squashed and they didn't have that pass down that was coming from the original enslaved. So as a family had children and such, and they were enslaved, enslaved, enslaved, they didn't have this musical knowledge or that tradition that was passed down to them like they did in New Orleans and under the French rule.

So that's kind of the huge, big difference between the British and the French. Once again, I know we're hammering this note, but it's a very important distinction between the two governments and how they ran everything. There was cultural squashing and then there was cultural allowance, I guess you would say. because it's still not great. Even though they had these rules, they still didn't follow them all the time. There's a lot of subjectivity even within the French rule, as well.

[00:26:50] **Liz Covart:** It sounds like in British North America and what would become the early part of the United States before the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, that there wasn't any chance for African American musical culture to flourish and develop those dynamic sounds that we hear in places like New Orleans because they weren't as tolerant as the French and Spanish were, in allowing for some aspects of African culture to flourish and develop in new ways.

[00:27:16] **Jon Bebe:** Yes, that's exactly correct.

[00:27:19] **Liz Covart:** So with that being the case, what happened when Louisiana joins the United States and New Orleans becomes an American city? What happened to this thriving African and African American culture that had developed out of French Louisiana?



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[00:27:35] **Jon Bebe:** Well, to be honest, most people in New Orleans didn't even know it changed. So when it was French rule and then became Spanish rule and then went back to French and then became US, most people who lived in New Orleans, from my understanding, didn't even know that the rulership had changed. The way of life and everyday life pretty much stayed the same. The biggest difference was there was a different flag flying in Jackson Square and they had a different governor in the area, but the everyday life stayed the same.

One thing that did happen right after it became part of the United States was the Haitian immigrants—and this is right around the time of the Battle of 1812 and such. A lot of Haitian immigrants came into New Orleans as well. And this is just going to be another cultural influence of bringing those rhythms from the Caribbean up and it's going to double the population of New Orleans as well. Now there's a caveat with the Haitians escaping Haiti and that political mess that was there. Was that there wasn't an infrastructure for them in New Orleans at the time, so they actually kept a majority of them on boats in the river for an extended period of time. You're bringing food and water to boats and you're making them stay there because there just was no place for them, and they were also scared of, if you're going to bring in all these Haitians who were formerly enslaved, and they're going to join with the enslaved and they're going to revolt against the white plantation owners. So there was a lot of fear there, going into that timeframe. Then you get to the War of 1812 and the final battle against the British in 1815, and the enslaved actually played a role on both sides. The British had enslaved and also Andrew Jackson, free people of color, and enslaved fought on both sides.

But the city, you know, I mentioned at the beginning that classical music and opera started in the 1700s, and it's going to continue to be the main focus of the music that's in the French Quarter, all the way into the 1860s, right before the Civil War. And the enslaved, the free people of color, they are going to embrace this cultural phenomenon of opera and classical music, as well as what they have going on the outside of the plantations with the blues and the spirituals, as well. At the height of this opera fever, there was like fifteen opera houses all working and active within the French Quarter, and the French Quarter's pretty small. So I mean, it just goes to show you that music was an integral part of everybody's life. From the social, economic, low class, all the way to the upper crust of society.

I always thought this was an interesting side note because churches and religion was very important, too. So the free people of color would actually reserve parts of churches for the enslaved where they could go and they would have, you know, pews. They did the same thing in the operas. They would actually purchase tickets for the enslaved to go and see, you know, some of those operas when they didn't have money of their own. So it's kind of always a giving back within that culture as well.



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[00:30:30] **Liz Covart:** I'm glad you raised the topic of religion again, Jon, because we'd like to know what role religion played in the development of African and African American music in early America. We're sure it must have played a significant role because we have these iconic hymns and spirituals like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." But what was the role of religion in the development of African American music and how did that role differ—did it differ—in a place like New Orleans where there was a strong Catholic influence, where if we had gone to British North America or the United States, we'd see strong Protestant influences?

[00:31:05] **Jon Bebe:** When you're forced to be a Catholic, you still take your culture and imply it within it. So eventually it's going to lead to the Baptists, and that religious sect was just still in the Christian realm. That's where the spirituals are going to become an everyday part of life. That's where they're going to develop within the church, with that spirituality. As far as the enslaved are concerned, that is going to be where they can embrace these ideas that are forced upon them. And as the generations go by, I think it becomes more a part of the life that they accept and that they can embrace, so to speak. I would imagine that the first ones who are arriving and then get baptized, they don't know what's going on. They just know that they have to do whatever it takes to survive. But as the generations go, then this religion that is kind of rewarding them because Sunday is a day where they can do what they want. You can go to church, then you can have the drum circles, you can work, and it's all because of this religion that is part of the culture and now part of your culture, too. It's a rewarding process that creates this allowance for you to hopefully become not enslaved anymore. And so it becomes very embraced and if you fast forward to today's part of the city and you look at the makeup of it, the Catholic religion is still the number one religion in New Orleans through all sects of life.

So it's very interesting to me that being forced to follow one religion, if you have a little bit of a reward, so to speak, within that, then it becomes more embraced than other parts of the South where Catholicism isn't the number one religion. Get into the Baptist, and the other things that warp from that. Does that answer the question a little bit?

[00:32:54] **Liz Covart:** Yeah, it does. And I was just thinking about how when I toured the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio, how the curators made a real big point of telling visitors like myself that a lot of what we consider to be modern American music really comes from this southern, New Orleans-centered musical culture that developed beginning in the early American period. And I wonder if you could tell us about the ways that African American music started to catch on with mainstream America and why it took until the 1920s for this music to become so widespread.

[00:33:27] **Jon Bebe:** Well, I think one of the big things that's going to happen is the recording of music is going to start taking place in the late teens. 1917 is when the first jazz recording is recorded. It's actually a group of Sicilians out of New Orleans. It's going to go up to Thomas



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Edison in New Jersey. the Original Jass Band, J-A-S-S. So “jass” is the precursor to jazz, which I can take a quick side note. So jass, they think that name came from maybe the jasmine perfume that the ladies wore in the brothels and such, but there’s a problem with that word. If you take away the *j*, it creates another word. And supposedly in Chicago, when they were putting up these flyers in the early 1920s to promote the bands, the jass bands, those *j*’s would always disappear. For some reason, they got vandalized, so they had to find another word, and this is when, in Chicago, the word “jazz” gets applied to this music, this happy music, dance music that’s coming from New Orleans. Interesting side note on that side note is that “jazz” was first used in print in 1850s in San Francisco, and it was used to describe a pitch in baseball. I guess the writer said that he really jazzed that pitch in, or the throw in, to the catcher. So from 1850s San Francisco to early 1920s Chicago, it makes its way there and becomes a part of it.

Now, getting back to the, uh, influence of what happens in New Orleans onto the rest of the music and through the United States, it’s going to impact rock and roll, R&B, country, pretty much all the major ones. And it has to do with the recordings that are going to spread, but also there’s going to be a mass exodus of musicians from the South and spreading out. And there was also musical tours going on, as well. There was a couple specific, like routes that they were due, like across Texas to Florida was one the musicians would go on, on tours. The Mississippi is the first great interstate of the country and that’s why, you know, you get places like Memphis and Chicago where going to explode. So the musicians from New Orleans are going to leave New Orleans and bring this music to the rest of the country, as well. And then as they get there, you know, you get different music in Memphis, you get different music in Kansas City, you get different music in Chicago. Then New York is going to have their own style of music that’s going to develop. Then eventually Hollywood is going to grab ahold of this. And then, you know, with the movies and the innovation of sound and these kind of things, it’s going to take that and even explode even further. And that’s when it’s really going to go kind of worldwide. Then the Europeans are going to embrace it, and then there’s going to be a pipeline from New Orleans to France, as well.

And then later on, New Orleans to Sweden, and then New Orleans to pretty much everywhere in the world. This music is going to influence and have an impact in early rock and roll. Fats Domino, Elvis, Little Richard, B. B. King. All of their influence is going to come from, I mean, Elvis is going to get from all those guys and take it and blow it up and make it big. But it’s going to pretty much sound the same as the music that was played here in the early 1900s. Fats Domino, “I’m Walkin’,” That bamboula rhythm is the left hand if you’re playing the piano, it’s the same thing. It’s the same song. If you move into 1960s R&B, you got Professor Longhair. He’s using the Bamboula in his songs. Dr. John, Harry Connick Jr. All these modern-day guys, they’re still playing with these same rhythms that have been around with music for a hundred years. I find it fascinating and interesting and you can really relate everything back to the music that coalesced in about 1896.



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[00:36:57] **Liz Covart:** I guess that's something we don't really appreciate in our highly connected twenty-first century, is just how regional everything was until the advent of broadcast radio, until we had the ability to broadcast music and news across the United States and to create, you know, somewhat of a uniform-ish American culture, there was just a lot of regionality in music. You could only appreciate what you heard and develop a taste for what you heard. And most of what you would hear before radio was music in your region.

[00:37:28] **Jon Bebe:** Yes, the radio, recordings, records, all of this is what's going to push the music that's regionalized, just like you said, out to places that could never find it. Because if you're a musician, you get your little tours and you go to the places that you know and you do that and you do it over and over again. That still happens today. We have musicians from New Orleans, they have connections in New York, they have connections in Wisconsin and they'll just repeat these things every year. You get those guaranteed paydays and you get the comfort of knowing what you're doing. Because there's nothing like going on a tour for the very first time when you have a lot of unknowns. You don't know who the club owners are, you don't know if you're going to get paid. Once these things get established and you have all the groundwork laid, it's much easier to just keep repeating and bringing the music to the people in that regard.

With the advent of the radio and records then the touring, it still happens. Because still people want to feel the energy and see the live music, but now you can also pay a lot less money or stay home and listen to this and have this music be a part of your life without going out and doing those things. So it's just going to make it explode. Technology really made this happen.

[00:38:39] **Liz Covart:** Now, a lot of what we appreciate in music sounds like it comes from these early rhythms, these African rhythms, like the bamboula, and we just talked about how band tours, the invention of radio really helped increase the number of people around the United States who would hear this African- and African American-inspired music. But listening to music doesn't mean acceptance of music. So Jon, how did white Americans and white America become accepting of African American music? How did it go to being rock and roll that everyone loves? Because we are talking about times when slavery, Jim Crow, and racial segregation existed.

[00:39:19] **Jon Bebe:** Well, I think they made a very big push. So I think the easiest one is to talk about early rock and roll. Cause early rock and roll and early jazz, they're parallels and they're the same thing, basically, to me and if you analyze the music, it's the same type of music. There was a big push and I think they even got the title and called it rock and roll because they wanted to reach white America. So you've taken this music that was made more for the African Americans at that time and you want to make it broad stream and you want to reach the audience that has more money. Everything is always driven by the economy. Even the creation of jazz was driven by the economy. So this is when if you take something that's called something and you



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change it slightly and you call it something else and you package it a little bit differently, now it can reach white America.

Elvis, the new movie just came out and I heard it's very good, uh, I haven't seen it myself. He was always very gracious and gave credit to where he got all of his music from. He got it from the African American community and he repackaged it and put it out there in his way with his hip twists and everything, capturing the excitements of the dance that the African Americans did, the musical grooves and such and brought it to that audience, that was more acceptable for a white person packaging it than an African American one. Made it easier for the record companies to sell this and such. Everything is really driven by money. Be honest with you, slavery all the way up until the music of today. It's all driven by the big business and how much profit we can make from it.

[00:40:54] **Liz Covart:** That's a really interesting way to frame it. This notion that it's all about money. That's certainly something that applies to early America. For example, you talked about call-and-response songs earlier and how they were used out on plantations to make sure the enslaved people were working, and even in this early music, while it helped enslave people to pass on messages and communicate with one another and work out their fury at being enslaved, it was also music driven by an economic need of needing people to work and to tend crops like tobacco, cotton, and indigo.

[00:41:26] **Jon Bebe:** Oh, yes. It was very intentional. If you were singing, you were working and you were supposedly happy. I mean, that was the last part that always gets me, was hear these interviews from the slave owners and they were saying, they were singing and they were happy and they were enjoying their life, which that really wasn't the case, but they were just doing the best they could. And doing any kind of mindless tasks that's the same thing over and over again, music does offer at least some kind of solace to the soul and helps you get through those days. It helps keep you going. A way to stay sane under in just extremely trying circumstances.

[00:42:06] **Liz Covart:** Jon, what do you think has been the greatest influence or contribution of African and African American music to the music of the United States?

[00:42:16] **Jon Bebe:** Oh, that's a tough one, but I just got to say the blues, the whole development of the blues, because you can have the blues without jazz, but you can't have jazz without the blues. It's a major, major ingredient, and it's really what is going to be the tipping point with the creation of jazz. Because you're going to have all these other elements that are around. So you had classical music opera going about to the 1860s, and then from the 1860s about to the 1890s, it's going to be more marching bands, ceremonial type of music made for, you know, very proper dancing and such. The 1890s, early 1890s, is when ragtime is going to





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pop in there. So you're going to have those syncopated rhythms with that kind of stride, piano sound, if it's piano, but full bands are playing this as well.

And then in 1896 is when that last element is going to come in, and it's going to be brought in by a man named Buddy Bolden, whose ancestors were enslaved. And he was a cornet player and he was just taken with that blues sound and he's going to bring it in from the country and he's going to be the one who's going to put it in to the music. Blues-infused improvisation is going to start because that's another major element of jazz. But this is really going to be the tipping point where people are just going to throng to Buddy Bolden and that new sound, and it's going to clash with the established musicians that were there. Kind of the classically trained, the guys who could read music, write music, were now going head-to-head with this new blues-infused music that they were learning by ear, that they weren't using music, that they were just picking up songs, repurposing old traditional songs from different elements in the world. And this is where economy is going to come into play. Buddy Bolden and this blues infusion is going to win out because that's where the people are going to be going. Every time he would go and perform the clubs would be packed. The bars would be packed. People would, you know, leave wherever they were playing and go see Buddy Bolden.

And he was also kind of famous for stealing audiences as well. There's a famous story where there's two parks side-by-side, and in one park there was a band and they were playing the usual, you know, more ceremonial-style music. And it was the John Robichaux Orchestra, was the name of it, creoles. And then Buddy Bolden sets up in the park adjacent with his band of ragtag, blues, jazz musicians, and they wait till the crowd gathers around John Robichaux, and then they start playing, and then they steal the crowd. So that's a very famous story that we tell around here. And John Robichaux was kind of the leader of this old guard, and apparently he did not care very much for Buddy Bolden and in his upstart music that was below him. But within a year after Buddy Bolden making it on the scene and creating this, John Robichaux was playing blues-infused music too. The reason we know this is because there's flyers that they have at the Hogan Archives, and you can see they actually state that they're playing the new music, the bluesy music, and so we know that there was a big switch.

[00:45:11] **Liz Covart:** You know, it just occurred to me that the blues is something that has come up throughout our conversation, and while we've talked about jazz and spirituals, we haven't actually talked about the blues. So Jon, would you tell us about the blues, what it sounds like and about its connections with jazz?

[00:45:30] **Jon Bebe:** Well, the blues is a specific form of music. It can be eight bars, twelve bars, sixteen bars, and it's going to have basically three chords in it. The chords is going to be founded from the first note of the scale, the fourth note, and the fifth note in the scale. We don't want to get too much into music theory because everyone will just fall asleep. And you're also



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going to have, where you're going to bend down and have the blues notes. There's actually a blues scale. We're just going to have that specific sound to it. If you play those chords, and you have to play those chords in the correct order, as well. because if you just play them in an incorrect order, you're going to end up with songs that are like "Wild Thing" or "La Bamba." They're all three-chord songs too, but they're not the blues. So there's a very strict pattern to strictly be the blues.

Jazz is going to take this and evolve it. Jazz is always going to evolve. It's going to start off very simple and then it's going to get more and more complex, especially as you get into the swing era of the thirties when you get into the bop in the fifties, you know, it's just going to get more and more complex. And this is where we lose a lot of people in the listening of jazz. It goes from being a music that's set with a strong melody and made for people to dance, to more of about the performer and how he can artistically interpret the original melody into what he can technically do on his instrument, therefore expanding his repertoire.

It's like sixty years involvement, but it's definitely going to take turns. Then you're going to have West Coast jazz versus East Coast jazz. Which has different feel, different chords, different styles going to be in there. Jazz is huge. There's so many different subgenres within jazz that, you know, you could really go on for days about it. But the original, traditional New Orleans music was very simple, had very strong melodies, and was closer to the blues. It was bluesy in most cases. That's kind of where the chips fall, if you may.

[00:47:24] **Liz Covart:** So we've talked a lot about music today. And I wonder, Jon, why do you think it's important for Americans to have a better understanding about their musical history? What do you think a better knowledge of African and African American music, New Orleans music, can do for our knowledge about American and early American history?

[00:47:43] **Jon Bebe:** Oh, that's a great question. Well, everything is tied together and music, it can really pinpoint specific time and place with a certain song. Like I always think of the Robin Williams movie, *Good Morning, Vietnam*, and they use Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World" within that movie. And so it really brings you into the Vietnam era right there because that song came out in like 1967, it was part of it. So if a song can bring you to a time and place that sets you up for what's happening politically, economically, culturally. If you listen to music from the early fifties, you know, you just feel that time warp within you. If you listen to swing music from the 1940s, you know, you just like, World War II, you have all these connections with the music and it just brings you to those places.

I know that this is a little bit off with what you're asking, but you know, with Alzheimer's patients and such, if they play a specific song and the person can relate to it can bring them back to the reality of the world of where they're at for that short time when they're hearing that song.



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Which is, you know, it's a wonderful power that music has and it triggers the brain just, you know, a little bit differently than other things. So to me, music is a very, very powerful tool. With media, with the visual movies and stuff, if you didn't have the music behind them, like when Darth Vader appears, you have the empire theme, it just wouldn't be as imposing without that music.

[00:49:03] **Liz Covart:** Well, speaking of time warps, it's time for us to jump into a different kind of time warp, the *Ben Franklin's World* "Time Warp." This is a fun segment of the show where we ask you a hypothetical history question about what might have happened if something had occurred differently or someone had acted differently. In your opinion, Jon, what would American music sound like today if Africans had not been enslaved and forced to move to North America?

[00:49:48] **Jon Bebe:** Well, I think we would, uh, have a more classical-based music. Our influences are the British and French and a little bit of the Spanish, and that's where our main focus would probably still lie on. Classical music would probably be more reigning supreme and even though it would probably evolve from there, we wouldn't have that blues influence, where you're kind of breaking the rules that were so written. Everything would be more rote, be more strict, and more proper. So I don't think the evolution would be there. We wouldn't have had the same bands and the same interaction.

[00:50:23] **Liz Covart:** Well, I know you've piqued our curiosity about the history of jazz and New Orleans as a hub of American music. So would you tell us about any exciting exhibits or events at the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park that we can visit and be a part of?

[00:50:38] **Jon Bebe:** New Orleans is a place where we have festivals almost every week. Be ready for our Christmas special that is going to be coming out right around the holiday. We do this perennially every year. It'll be on our social media and also our website. And then later on in January, we have our Battle of New Orleans celebration. But when we get back to the music, when the weather starts getting a little bit nicer in April, we have some of the best festivals in the world. We have French Quarter Fest, where they set up stages all around French Quarter. It's all free. And some of the greatest jazz musicians in the world come and if you want to visit New Orleans, the weather's nice, and that's an excellent time. And the Park Service always runs the, uh, children's stage for that as well. And then right after that we have Jazz Fest, which has taken on a whole life of itself. It started with just jazz musicians, but now it has every possible musical genre you can think of playing. And that's always right around two weeks after French Quarter Fest. So those are two big festivals.

Within the park itself, we're getting prepared to renovate the visitor center. Right now, the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park is combined with Jean Lafitte National Historical Park



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within the French Quarter, and so we're going to be expanding upon that, creating a brand-new stage and performance area. You know, this will probably take a little bit of time because the government does work slowly. But when it's finished, it's going to be a beautiful place. So you can still see us performing within our visitor center there until that happens. And we also have a wonderful partnership with the New Orleans Jazz Museum, which is run by the state. And we do performances in their theater usually two, three times a week as well.

[00:52:11] **Liz Covart:** And do you have any tips or tricks for us when we're visiting the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park? Do you perhaps have a favorite exhibit or historical site that we should check out?

[00:52:20] **Jon Bebe:** Well, our park's pretty small, but I always recommend find out when our performances are and come for those. Because when the music is playing, that's when the Park really comes alive. Now, in the French Quarter in general, there's some wonderful museums and the World War II Museum, which is in the central business district, is a world-class museum. It is so well done, and I don't mind giving them props. I've performed in there several times. We do have partnerships and do partnership performances with them, as well, because, you know, jazz music during World War II, it was huge and it was just so wonderfully done that giving them a little bit of credit is, it's a nice thing to do.

[00:52:57] **Liz Covart:** And where is the best place for us to learn more about the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park and your performances?

[00:53:03] **Jon Bebe:** Believe it or not, we do have a website, New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, and you can go on there, you see our calendar with all the events of who's doing what. It also has some formative things for features. We have lesson plans on there that coincide with songs that we have recorded within the park, so it's a pretty useful website.

[00:53:24] **Liz Covart:** Jon Bebe, thank you for taking us into the African-inspired music of New Orleans and for helping us better understand American musical history.

[00:53:32] **Jon Bebe:** Oh, it's been my pleasure. I hope everybody learned a thing or two and was somewhat entertained by our chat. It was very fun for me and I'm very happy that, uh, you asked me to talk about this.

[00:53:43] **Liz Covart:** The importance of African and African American musical traditions and developments cannot be overstated when we discuss the history of music in the United States. The dynamic rhythms of the bamboula, the soulful words and singing of spirituals and the blues, and the playfulness of jazz, have influenced just about every musical artform and genre that we



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hear in the United States. Of course, none of these musical developments would've been possible if it hadn't been for slavery. As we heard from Jon, slavery created the awful conditions in which millions of Africans were enslaved and forcibly brought across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas and to the Caribbean. Now, despite all odds, some of these Africans were able to carry small flutes and other instruments with them. They were able to bring their Senegambian rhythms and beats in their heads. And after a time, these instruments and memories of music served as the basis for the recreation of African music and for the development of new African-inspired music in the Americas. Now, Jon did a great job of telling us how African beats like the bamboula and the songs sung in the plantation fields, evolved into other types of music. Music like the blues, ragtime, jazz, and eventually rock and roll, as guests in our previous episodes related, and as Steven Lewis of the Smithsonian so aptly stated, without African and African American music, there would not be the American music that we hear and enjoy today.

Holly White and I hope you have enjoyed this five-episode series on music in early America, and we hope we are able to get answers to your questions. If you have more questions, just let us know. We view this series as a starting point for future conversations and explorations. Look for more information about Jon, the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today on the show notes page, [benfranklinworld.com/347](http://benfranklinworld.com/347). If you enjoyed this series, please tell your friends and family about it. Production assistance for this podcast comes from The Omohundro Institute's digital audio team, Joseph Adelman, Holly White, Ian Tonat, and Dylan Holzer. Breakmaster Cylinder composed our custom theme music. This podcast is part of the AirWave Media podcast network. To discover and listen to their other podcasts, visit [AirWave media.com](http://AirWave media.com).

Finally, if you do have more questions about music in early America, let me know, [liz@benfranklinworld.com](mailto:liz@benfranklinworld.com). I also wish you and yours a very merry Christmas if you celebrate and a happy New Year. I'll be back with a brand-new episode in two weeks on January 3. *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of the Omohundro Institute and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.