

MONTREAL "OPEN CITY": The rise & fall of Montreal's jazz scene

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EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

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Jazz music's history had different effects on different cities. Montreal was one city, which experienced an unorthodox pattern of growth beginning in the twenties. During the twenties Montreal's location, race relations, and availability of alcohol produced one of the fastest growing entertainment industries in North America. Its place in jazz history is important because Montreal was the "refugee camp ground" for the over-flow of New York based musicians, by providing a test market and steady employment. Montreal was the ultimate testing ground for experimenting American musicians.

Montreal's Jazz pioneers arrived during World War I when a migration of some 400 000 blacks in search of jobs, occurred from Southern to Northern U.S.A. Musically the flow of blacks from southern to northern U.S.A. resulted in the introduction of blues music. However, the migration's impact in Montreal would be felt only several years later when local jazzmen began appearing on the local scene. Montreal did not produce any world-renowned jazz artists other than, Oscar Peterson and Oliver Jones. Montreal did however earn a reputation as a city, which showcased talent in addition to the many big name stars, who toured in the city.

Racism and unemployment in the U.S. coinciding with the hiring of porters at Canadian Railways encouraged migration into Canada with Montreal being home to

most of these immigrants. Racism within the Montreal music industry was not a major factor because there were only about 25 black musicians in the twenties, of which only four succeeded to play in big bands. Therefore, they were not seen as a job threat, as they were in the U.S., but rather as nourishment to a very young Jazz industry. The result was a musical exchange between blacks and whites, which was unheard of at the time in the United States. The industry in terms of performance remained segregated as club owners, who hired Blacks, would not mix them with white musicians, despite their talent.

When prohibition began, Montreal's free flow of alcohol made it a favourite attraction for touring musicians. In addition, in the late twenties and early thirties a second wave of immigrants composed of musicians, arrived by way of ferry. One of these ferries was named "The St. Henri", from New York state. As newly hired railway porters began to congregate at the Terminal Club and Rockhead's Paradise (Canada's most popular black club), and as black immigrants began to settle around the St. Antoine area, Montreal's jazz industry took shape and became the fastest growing entertainment industry in the world.

FILM IMPACT

Montreal's jazz history knew its beginnings from the booming film industry. The film industry provided jazz musicians with their first halls in which they could play to promote their brand of music. For example Simone Martucci who appeared nightly at the Venetian Gardens and The Melody Kings who appeared nightly at The Jardin De Dance both appeared regularly at United Artists theatres like the Plaza, Belmont, Mont Royal, Laurier and Papineau. Furthermore movie palaces also provided an arena where vaudeville performers could present performances which fostered the invitation of many vaudeville groups. Vaudeville shows provided another outlet of employment for jazz musicians because they provided very early manifestations of jazz music. In addition vaudeville also provided an important outlet where Montreal audiences could witness black music appearing at movie palaces like the Gayte, Loew's, St. Denis, Princess, and Palace. One of these notable vaudeville shows was called Shuffle Along and included Louis Armstrong and James Slap Rags who is believed to be the first black musician to settle in Montreal in the twenties. By 1925 the Gayety theatre was regularly presenting Black performers and coloured jazz orchestras. In addition the larger theatres began importing acts from the Cotton Club like Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, and Cab Calloway. A side effect to these visiting Black performers was the beginning of an after hour jam session at the Terminal club which became a sure stop for any visiting Black musician.

Montreal's movie palaces were grand and added to this attraction, but they did not participate in concert performance to the extent that Carnegie Hall or Radio City Music Hall did in the U.S. The four most notable participants were Loew's theatre, the Gayté, the St. Denis, and later the Seville. These theatres presented artists like Maurice Chevalier, Yves Montand, Milton Berle, Red Skelton, and Will Rogers in their mixed vaudeville and film formulas.

Vaudeville, Broadway, and the silent film industry provided the bulk of employment prior to the establishment of a nightlife scene in Montreal. However an attraction, in addition to the vaudeville, Broadway and film programs, did exist in the way that these halls were built to impress. Indeed movie palaces did attract people by the thousands because they were made to impress: "these buildings were made to astound people, to awe them with their size and grandeur, to remove them as far as possible from modest flats and toilworn lives, like kings and queens in a castle". In doing so theatres and movie palaces provided a place where show business, including film, jazz music, dance, and vaudeville, could grow as a whole. Thus the snowball effect caused these various industries to rely on each other, which is one of the many reasons why the era from 1900-1950 was called the golden age of show business. Economically movie palaces created the demand for restaurants and cafés where people could meet before and after movies. Therefore as the palaces were built in great numbers so were restaurants and cafés which created the demand for late night entertainment including a variety of different nightclubs. One fact remains certain, show business, involving every facet of entertainment such as cafés, restaurants, gambling, prostitution, theatres, films, and night-clubs, could survive without jazz music, but jazz music could not survive without show business. In essence these surrounding industries served as attractions which helped lure people towards the style of music. In fact each of the industries helped the other by attracting people to other facets of the industry which is how the surge of talent occurred in the 30s and 40s thus explaining the origins of the American "The Golden Era".

THE RECORDING INDUSTRY

The recordings of Black musicians, both in Canada and the United States, were almost exclusively distributed in the United States because the Canadian market was judged too small for distribution. Luckily clubs and vaudeville shows imported black artists because Canadian institutions repeatedly denied the Canadian musicians whether black or white access to larger markets because its institutions were too small to be efficient in the distributing process. The recording industry's main contribution to Montreal was the attraction it provided musicians thus giving them another reason to come to Montreal.

ORGANIZED CRIME

Montreal's financial base for its music industry came from organised crime. Montreal's organised crime used the swing music era as a front "par excellence" where the Mafia could cover up all of its illegal activities. Organised crime became an issue in the forties because war and violence erupted amongst various leaders for control of the nightclubs scene, which was quickly halted by Drapeau's initiatives to close many of these clubs down. Le Café Romeo, Le Faisan Doré, Le Café de la Paix, L'American Spaghetti House, Club Metropole, Casa Del Sol, Chez Pareé, and the El Morocco were all owned by the Cotroni Organisation.

Organised Crime was centred around the red light district- the area bounded by Sherbrooke, Guy, St. Antoine, and St. Urbain- with some 115 houses of prostitution and some 250 gambling houses mostly located on Peel, Mountain, Stanley, St. Catherine, and La Gauchetière streets. Organised Crime's fostering of the music industry ended when the Mafia leader's clubs were closed down and musicians were put out of work.

However when we talk about organised crime, which played an important role in the operation of these nightspots, we also have to consider the prostitution houses, gambling operations and brothels because they were all inter-linked with each other as parts of an entire industry. These sorts of places were usually amongst the first to get raided by the police because their activities were more illicitly illegal. When it came down to prostitution and gambling police were apparently raiding these establishments on a regular basis; at least that is what it looked like on the surface. In reality police officers were as much part of the organised crime as the gangsters themselves were. Police officers, in fact received five thousand dollars in hand-outs each week, which controlled the amount of times any given club was raided or whom would be arrested on the scene to make everything look official. Harry Davis, whose headquarters was located on Stanley Street, was the edge man (also known as l'homme de paille) which simply meant that he was in charge of distributing the graft or payoff to local officers.

In return for payoffs local club owners were warned in advance as to when police officers would raid their club and would thereby be expected to supply a stooge to be arrested to make the whole event look real. Harry Feldman, one of the famed owners of the gambling ring in Montreal, would be warned in advance, and would then proceed to prepare Barney Shulkin to be arrested. Similarly Paulette Dery was the front person who would be arrested, for Madame Beauchamp (owner of many prostitution houses), some 85 times. Ironically when police would visit these prostitution houses as customers they would take the time with Madame Beauchamp to draw up a list of places to be raided the following week. Funnily

enough when fights would break out in prostitution houses, police would race over because the first one on the scene would receive a free night with the ladies.

The betting establishments closed down quietly after a raid by Pax Plante and his officers in the, mid forties without warning on a Bleury Street gambling house where the owner Julius Silverberg was arrested. Other establishments voluntarily closed down. Plante essentially achieved the closure of these establishments within a year; something the entire police force could not achieve in half a century.

Brothels were problematic for the military because too many soldiers were contracting syphilis and gonorrhoea and therefore the Canadian military ordered the brothels to close down. The mention of organised crime in terms of prostitution and gambling relating to jazz music is important because it provides an aspect of nightlife, of which jazz fans were a part. It illustrates how the hierarchy of vice can be mixed into the entertainment industry and thus an integral part of show business.

RELIGION

Religious groups attempted to force, through a 15 000 name petition, the closing of night-clubs which were operated by vice but had no impact because the underworld also served politicians at election time. However when the church teamed up with police and the law then they succeeded. In essence the church had to contend with a combination of corrupt politicians, crooked cops, underworld patrons, and a pliable press.

All this changed when a young flamboyant police officer, a dedicated catholic, appointed head of the morality police squad in 1945 named Pacifique Plante. Plante then sought the services of lawyer Jean Drapeau, another dedicated catholic, to prepare a file against vice. In addition Plante also went to Le Devoir where a ghostwriter (implies the writer was unknown for security reasons) named Gérard Pelletier was hired to write a series of 60 articles between November 28 1949 and February 18, 1950. Then Plante and Drapeau financing their legal venture by selling 7000 memberships and enlisting the help of 275 religious, patriotic, social and civic groups to pay for court and lawyer costs. In short the combination of religion, law, and a morality squad enabled religion to leave its mark by defying vice and organised crime in Montreal.

A lot of night clubs were closed down during the Drapeau regime's clean up operation ending in 1954, and many did not re-open. What organised crime did for music during the big band era was offer a place for musicians to play and earn a living. Montreal's industry was no different from the United States in the post war era. It had to adjust to the changes that the war had brought on; most notably bebop and it found itself in constant struggle for survival. However Montreal's reputation as a jazz routed city was established in that era with effects that last and continue every year by the presence of The Montreal International Jazz Festival.

CLUBS AND PERSONALITIES

The main personalities that arose out of Montreal's industry were Johnny Holmes, Oscar Peterson, Louis Metcalf, Oliver Jones, Vic Vogel, the Biddles musical family, the Canadian Ambassadors, and Guy Lombardo and his Royal Canadians (London, Ontario) amongst others. The era also created select Jazz clubs like Café St.Michel, Bellevue Casino, Rockhead's Paradise, and the Jazz Workshop, which made Montreal feel like home for a lot of American musicians and was billed like a jazz shrine. The Café St.Michel although it opened in the late twenties achieved its height in the post war era by turning itself into a Canadian Bebop shrine, which featured Louis Metcalf. Rockhead's Paradise opened in 1928 with money made from smuggling liquor into the U.S. for Al Capone and became Canada's best club featuring black entertainers. The Bellevue Casino replaced the auditorium after the big band dance craze. The Bellevue Casino employed 97 people, spent 8-10 000 dollars a week on entertainment and made 1.5 million dollars a year. It attracted a crowd of 1400 on weekdays and 2000 on Saturdays, where you could see top American acts and have a beer for less then two dollars.

The workshop was probably the most important of them all because it helped home based jazz musicians by providing a free place to practice, provided a regular audience, and provided younger musicians with a breeding ground for developing new ideas. The workshop located at Chez Parée, which was similar to the Hooper's Club in New York, also provided a space located behind a pool room for tap dancers to practice at no charge, and collected funds for musicians at the door as the jam sessions became a popular attraction. The workshop demonstrated the poverty endured by Montreal's home based musicians, who were reduced to attending workshops while U.S. musicians benefited from all the jobs. Major clubs and show halls like the Seville, the Ideal Beach Dance Pavillion, the Forum, and the Gayté, preferred to import major names from the U.S., like Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Lionel Hampton.

The goal of many Montreal based musicians was to earn popularity to move on, to the States where fortune awaited. However U.S. immigration blocked Canadian

musicians from entering the U.S., but musicians, such as Oscar Peterson, who did make it in the United States, kept the dream alive. Very few Canadians were recorded in the 20s, 30s, and 40s therefore bands could not reach wide audiences like their counter parts in the United States so Canadians are restricted to local success with no hopes of international fame.

POST 1950 JAZZ SCENE IN MONTREAL AND ITS DECLINE

The decline of the era when Montreal was known as "The Paris of North America" or "Montreal Ville Ouverte" began in 1944, when the first steps to fight organised crime were put forward under the Canon plan. The Canon plan suggested using the military to help out numbered police to fight organised crime in Montreal. Police were outnumbered, because wartime production paid more than police work, to the point where there was more liquor licences in Montreal than there were police officers during the 30's and 40's. However, the year that action against clubs came was 1954 when Drapeau came to power and within one year no gambling could be found in Montreal. The sad reality was that while vice was being destroyed Montreal's nightlife went with it, and the innocent- that is, the local musicians and entertainers suffered the most from Montreal's decline as a centre of entertainment.

by Pierre Hobson