

MONTREAL & TORONTO JAZZ: Montreal's leading success

This essay will discuss why Montreal's jazz music scene was more successful than Toronto's in the first half of the century. These reasons comprise prohibition, job opportunities attracting a Black population, proximity to New York, multiple ethnic communities, liquor laws, racial tolerance, and a seemingly 'destined' booming downtown core. 11 pages long.

Montreal and Toronto jazz

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JOBS

Perhaps the first attraction to Montreal, within a series of events, was job opportunities, not in the field of music but rather in the business of running railways. Both the Canadian Pacific and Grand Trunk established their training headquarters for porters in Montreal's St. Antoine district. Therefore Montreal provided a good arena where Blacks could work full time as porters to earn a living, while they maintained a part time weekend status as a musician in the city's nightclubs. These opportunities led to the formation of a thriving Black community in Montreal at the beginning of the century where among other activities, gambling, prostitution, and other illicit activities took place. As Blacks established their permanent residences in the city, they enriched Montreal with their culture, but more specifically, for the context of this essay, their music. Their settlements in the beginning of the century created a vibrant Black neighborhood which not only later produced home grown talent like Oscar Peterson, but also a hot spot which attracted other visiting Black musicians from the United States.

BLACK POPULATION

This snowball effect multiplied itself as the community grew and the visits by outside musicians increased in frequency. The acts got bigger and bigger with

names like Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington, and Cab Calloway. This was unique to Montreal in the Canadian context leaving Toronto along with the rest of Canada, lacking a geographically concentrated music scene such as Montreal's St. Antoine district and downtown core. As a general rule the amount of Blacks living in Canada was never big enough to threaten any segment of the population in terms of politics, forming their own group, intermarriage, or alienating the working class. Thus they enjoyed a stable relationship with white Canadians in an era of segregation. Many indications suggest that there were not many Blacks living in Montreal at the time. If this is so, how can a tiny black population, at all account for the vibrancy of the St. Antoine district, which has been compared to New York's 52nd street? 52nd street was a world jazz capital famed for its rich be-bop content. 52nd street was like a St. Catherine Street of progressive jazz located in the heart of New York City. This being said, Montreal being compared to the jazz capital of the world is significant because it reveals what major jazz critics thought of this little city north of the border. The Canadian statistics do not reflect the number of Black immigrants as well as the visiting artists, who crept into Canada from the 30s well into the 50s. Labor laws were harsh on musicians on both sides of the border, therefore the amount of illegal working musicians composed a far greater number of people than the Black residents actually listed.

PROHIBITION

Very restrictive 1930's liquor laws outside Quebec, and until 1933 American prohibition added another circumstance, from which Montreal benefited the most in the Canadian market. Regulatory laws in other provinces and major cities further benefited Montreal because, only in Montreal could a person walk into a club at four a.m. and openly ask for hard liquor. Montreal did have its regulatory laws but vice was so implanted into the police department, whose officers received weekly handouts, that Montreal's nightlife was literally out of control. The link between vice and the police department will be discussed in detail momentarily. As late as 1927, liquor laws in Toronto restricted alcohol sales to specially packaged packs as sold by the government, and selling alcohol by the glass was strictly forbidden, which meant that many fine liquors or specialty liquors were not available. In fact cocktail lounges were legalized in Toronto only in 1947, which literally meant that jazz bands did not even have places to perform their music other than multi-purpose halls. Until the mid-fifties Montreal was literally open for business all night long whether it be for alcohol, gambling or prostitution. Montreal's bars were open all night-long which attracted musicians because jazz and liquor are synonymous with each other, thus leading many American musicians to either establish themselves permanently or stay for the length of prohibition. By the time prohibition was ended Montreal's reputation was established all over the world as a city that was open all night long or as the saying goes as an "open city".

THE RELIGIOUS FACTOR

Montreal has always had the reputation of being a city that never sleeps where one could party all night long. Toronto only provided a business mood with nothing to do when businesses closed at five or six P.M. Toronto's Orange Order was to blame for Toronto's somber moodiness. The term "jazz" had sexual connotation rather than musical meaning, early in the century, which gave jazz music a bad name in the eyes of Protestants. Montreal had its own moralizers, including Catholicism, but Catholic protest did not succeed until Pax Plant and Jean Drapeau arrived on the scene in the early 1950's. In reality the catholic religion was defenseless against vice and essentially sought the help of the law and morality police squads and the catholic organization's financial contributions to assault vice in this city.

PROXIMITY TO NEW YORK

Another fortunate circumstance, which added to Montreal's advantages over Toronto, was its proximity to New York City. This was much more significant than Toronto's proximity to Chicago or Vancouver's to its southern West Coast neighbors. New York was unique in that its musical styles were composed of not one dominant style but of a melting pot of different styles. New York was famed for being the experimental city where new styles of music were tried and merged with newer ones, whereas Chicago and Los Angeles were cities where single styles evolved or had their era of fame. Chicago was famed for its blues and LA was famed for being an arena where the discovery of Swing music was made. New York's role was therefore composed of musical experiments and Montreal benefited from musicians, who searched for markets to test such experiments. Montreal's multi-ethnic composition located within a five-mile radius was the ideal market where ideas could be tested.

MONTREAL'S COMPOSITION

Montreal's multiple ethnic groups were mainly found within a five-mile radius stretching from Cremazie Street to the St. Laurence River and from Atwater to Frontenac. You could isolate the downtown core district even more by just including the "red light district" from St. Antoine to Sherbrooke and from St. Laurent to Atwater. Montreal's composition provided a small territorial testing ground, which supplied a montage of multiethnic groups. In fact Montreal's reputation as a "market tester" lasted until the early eighties. Montreal in its extensive variety also earned the reputation as being a city, which knew about jazz and music in general. This developed knowledge of jazz in Montreal to the extent that musicians knew that if they could make it in Montreal, you could make it anywhere.

TRAVELING ISSUE

Both Toronto and Montreal's relative proximity to New York kept them in touch with what was happening in New York. However Montreal benefited most because it was a lot closer to New York and musicians could not afford an extra six-hour ride for the sake of touring Toronto. Furthermore, as already mentioned above, musicians who did tour in Canadian cities usually only crossed the border and did not tour extensively in Canada, which meant that Toronto missed out on Montreal's numerous visitors.

Musicians traveled extensively during their tours of which numerous examples are available from American documentaries of Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, and Count Basie. These musicians often packed the whole band along with their instruments into a couple of cars because trains were too expensive. Canadian climates were much harsher, in terms of snowdrifts reaching a couple of feet high in the rural areas, in addition to icy or blocked roads. Furthermore our American counter-parts could travel far less because they had many more urban centers where their bands could play, whereas Canada's population was a lot more dispersed and therefore required more traveling for fewer gigs. Canada's climate and dispersed population made travelling by car difficult, as did the costs of gas and repairs. Even when trains did become affordable to musicians, once they got popular, their time limitations would have been a good enough reason to keep them away from Toronto.

MASS COMMUNICATION: FILM AND RADIO

The rise of jazz in Toronto was delayed by several factors until the late 1940's. Coverage of jazz in the Canadian context in terms of film and radio was absent. However Toronto and Montreal did benefit from the print media with magazines, like *Metronome* and *Downbeat*, which kept citizens of both cities in touch with what was happening in New York. However, Montreal's nightlife base was established and information from magazines could only help, but Toronto's nightlife was non-existent. Jack Litchfield points to two other factors by stating: "The dearth of Dixieland was continent-wide during the mid-1940s, a period when the pop singer had replaced the orchestra in the public favor. New York and Chicago were exceptions, or course, but Toronto certainly was not. The problem was aggravated by the lack of suitable locations for jazz bands to play, for Toronto's liquor laws prevented the public sale of liquor by the glass. Toronto, during this period, was a desert for jazz fans". In fact if it had not been for the Dixieland revivalists moment in the late forties, Toronto may have remained this desert for jazz. Although Jack Litchfield only covers traditional Dixieland jazz, he makes it clear that musicians had no places to perform their music because clubs, lounges, and any place relying on alcohol could not survive in Toronto prior to 1947. Jack Litchfield himself

remembers a time within living memory that this form of music was unheard of in Toronto.

RECORDING INDUSTRY

Thus far nothing has been said about the recording industry which may shed some light on Toronto's jazz scene. Unfortunately the recording industry also reveals Toronto's jazz drought. In fact the recording industry was centered in Montreal with Berliner Gramophone Company and the Combo Company, while Toronto had distribution companies like Columbia, Brunswick from the United States, and Pathé from France. Both cities had segments of the record producing business but Montreal was recording the music, which further attracted musicians from in and out of the city as the newly formed companies searched for recording talents.

NEWSPAPERS

Newspapers also have the potential of revealing a comparative study of Montreal and Toronto through the various entertainment advertisements, which serve as a measuring device. Toronto's newspapers confirm that indeed there was very little nightclub activity, and therefore very little jazz being played in the city prior to the mid-1950s. The Globe and Mail's entertainment sections indicate that there were a fair number of movie theatres in Toronto; however, none were considered architectural marvels like Montreal's palaces. More importantly there are no indications as to whether these movie Palaces were used as concert halls as was the case in Montreal. In addition The Globe and Mail did not have a section reserved to music. It did, however have a section for theatres, which showcased Classical music and feature films, and a section for Radio which illustrated that practically all of the Jazz music episodes were imported from the United States. The Globe and Mail is perhaps the clearest sign of Toronto's jazz desert as Jack Litchfield mentioned.

In theory Montreal should demonstrate an abundance of activity through newspaper advertisements, as there may have been 50 different name acts on any given Saturday night during Montreal's golden era. However the newspapers raised other possibilities which could also apply to Toronto. Montreal's papers did indicate a larger amount of advertisements concerning jazz performances however this amount was a lot smaller than expected. My theory for the lack of advertisements could in fact apply to any major city during this period from 1930-mid 1950s. My explanation hypothesizes the reliance of regular attendance on word of mouth advertising, which meant that nightclub operators did not need to advertise unless to publicize a major import like Sammy Davis Jr. or Gene Krupa. Advertising was less crucial than because people just simply ventured out at night for lack of leisure

activities within the home comparable to ours today. Television was not yet in general use, leaving radio as the major leisure activity in the home.

Toronto's Globe and Mail illustrates the jazz desert, which Jack Litchfield was mentioning early in the paper. The first and clearest illustration is the concentration on classical music. Secondly we can see that Toronto has a substantial number of movie palaces, without evidence that these palaces also serve as jazz concert halls. The article, which indicates the circled index, illustrates only a radio section on weekdays demonstrating the extent to which classical music was advertised. Furthermore another article illustrates the Concerts – Drama section. Toronto's newspapers help illustrate a total lack of any jazz music concert or group in Toronto at various periods between 1931 and 1956.

The Montreal articles of both the Star and Gazette are simple and straightforward illustrating the vibrancy of nightclub jazz acts including vaudeville shows, jazz singers, and musical groups whereas articles about Toronto were void of any jazz life. The contrast between Toronto and Montreal is striking and illustrated in these newspaper articles.

RACIAL ISSUE

Finally racial discrimination was not an issue as it was in the United States. Blacks could come to this city, find jobs, work with white musicians, and be accepted almost anywhere without being discriminated against. The Montreal jazz festival invites hundreds of musicians every year and many of them mention how going to Montreal is like coming home. The festival does indeed differentiate Montreal from other cities because it provides a clear example of how musicians find their roots in this city indicating a remembered past or a history of jazz in this city.

The two cities each had established black communities, but one was vibrant and the other was silent because sources seem to indicate few if any nightlife activities in the community. Montreal's community is documented through its jazz culture in that the community actively supported its nightlife with clubs like Rockhead's Paradise, Café st. Michel, and groups like, The Harlem Nights, and Louis Metcalf. In contrast Toronto's jazz history began at around 1920 with the arrival of Charles Stones colored jazz band from Detroit. In addition, through the thirties Toronto's black jazz scene was composed of one band, which passed from a club owner's hands to the next called The Harlem Aces. Owners often signed groups to prolonged contracts and would sell their contracts to other club owners similar to free agents in the national hockey league today. In comparison the Canadian Ambassadors

mention that upon their arrival in Montreal in 1933, the city's black community paralleled, in terms of social development and economics, those larger counterparts in the northern United States. Montreal's reason for having such a vibrant community has to do with job opportunities, which originally attracted blacks to the city. One fact is for certain, regardless of what cities blacks visited in Canada they found a momentary comfort in hotels and boarding houses accepting blacks.

Population estimates for both Montreal and Toronto suggested that there were somewhat more blacks in Toronto than Montreal. Why then was the amount of jazz activity, which both communities provided their respective cities so radically different? Why wasn't there a stronger presence on the part of blacks in Toronto? Or perhaps there was much more activity than research is capable of providing at this moment. The general lack of sources providing references to Blacks' jazz music culture in Canada contributed to making a discussion on blacks in both Montreal and Toronto very vague. Sadly the only indications we have come from the outside which indicates Montreal's liveliness while omitting a discussion on Toronto's black community altogether.

In conclusion Montreal's jazz music scene was more successful because prohibition, job opportunities attracting a Black population, proximity to New York, multiple ethnic communities, liquor laws, racial tolerance, all combined to provide Montreal with a more attractive and booming downtown core.

by Pierre Hobson