

"Jelly Roll" Morton

Jazz Musicians

Scott #2986

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Ferdinand Joseph Morton was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on October 20, 1890. Jelly Roll was born to light complexioned Creole parents and he considered himself more white than black. Ferdinand grew up in a musical family; both his father and stepfather were professional trombone players. Jelly Roll learned to play the guitar at the age of six, but his real love was the piano and by the age of 12 he was playing piano in the Storyville Bordellos, (a New Orleans district).

Jelly Roll traveled throughout the south playing in vaudeville and minstrel shows and he played in both New York and Chicago. He supplemented his income in pool halls and as a poker player. He was also known as a notorious womanizer. He published his famous Jelly Roll Blues in 1915. He recorded his first songs in 1923 and 1924 as a soloist but beginning in 1925 he recorded with his band, The Red Hot Peppers. Johnny Dodds and Kid Ory were both members of his band.

Some of his more popular tunes are:

King Porter Stomp, Wolverine blues, Mr. Jelly Roll, Shreveport Stomp, Black Bottom Stomp, Doctor Jazz, Wild Man Blues, and Sweet Substitute.

Jelly Roll moved to New York in 1928 and began running an All Girl Revue. He also ran a prostitution ring using these same ladies. He continued to record but with the advent of the Big Band Era his popularity declined. In 1935 he moved to Washington D.C. and opened a nightclub. While there he worked with Alan Lomax and recorded his songs for the Library of Congress.

He moved to California early in 1940, but ailing and tired he died soon after on July 10, 1941 in Los Angeles.

Jelly Roll was one of the very first giants of Jazz, however his own excesses had sabotaged his career. His bragging and arrogant manner made it hard to get good side men to play for him and his fast life style was also a detriment. He managed his career poorly throughout his entire life and made very few close friends.

It wasn't until after Jelly Roll's death that he gained the recognition he sought so unsuccessfully during his lifetime. He is recognized today as a great musical innovator and many Jazz pianists cite his influence on their style and approach.

Sources:

Encyclopedia Britannica

Encyclopedia Africana

Atlanta Music Group (AMG)