Optional equipment shown. *2007 models.

Of Swing

BEFORE THERE WAS LOUIS ARMSTRONG, THERE WAS HIS FRIEND AND MENTOR, THE CORNETIST JOE "KING" OLIVER. AT HIS HEIGHT HE AND HIS BAND FILLED THE BEST CHICAGO CLUBS WITH A PULSING, BLUES-TINGED SOUND THAT CHANGED AMERICAN MUSIC.

BY PETER GERLER

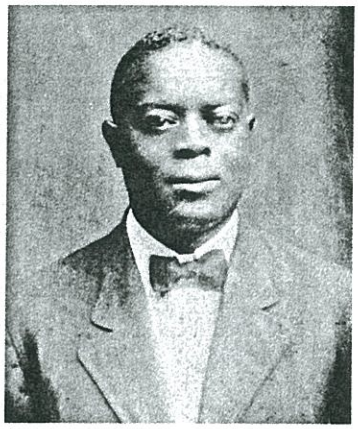
ON SEPTEMBER 8, 2005, THE NEW ORLEANS cornetist and bandleader Joseph "King" Oliver was one of the 12 American music masters to be inducted that year into the Nesuhi Ertegun Jazz Hall of Fame at Lincoln Center. Oliver's art emerged at a time before jazz was even called jazz, when early recordings produced a pallid reflection of the music's true, brilliant color. Next to other Lincoln Center inductees such as Duke Ellington, Art Tatum, Charles Mingus, and Billie Holiday, Oliver is dimly remembered.

Joe "King" Oliver (third from left) and his band rock in San Francisco, 1921.

And yet, said Martin

Williams, the late director of jazz at the Smithsonian Institution, "Without King Oliver . . . without the feeling and the form of his music, and the techniques he discovered with which to express them, jazz as we know it simply could not have been and could not be."

In New Orleans, beginning around 1911, Joe Oliver emerged as one of the big voices of an unprecedented music that would move American dancers as never before. His sound combined brass band rhythm, ragtime, and the blues and shouted out of the dancehalls, honky-tonks, and streets of the Crescent City. "Everybody played a different song, but everybody played the same song" is how one writer described it. Oliver and his bands delivered the music for a new century and helped put the verb *to swing* in the national vocabulary.



Joe Oliver around 1910, at the beginning of his career.

Not the least of his contributions came through his sinewy, blues-filled tone and his repertoire of brass effects. Using bottles, kazoos, cups, glasses, and homemade mutes, he turned his cornet into a rooster, a crying baby, or almost anything that began with "wa wa"—a vocal sound Oliver brought out of the late-night backrooms around the New Orleans brothels.

"He was the greatest freak trumpet player I ever knew," remembered his fellow Crescent City horn man Mutt Carey. "Joe could make his horn sound like a Holy Roller meeting; God, what that man could do with his horn!"

Later, in Chicago, with King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, the musician assembled a group that has been called the best jazz band ever. It has influenced every successive generation of American musicians. The great Duke Ellington trumpeter Bubber Miley sat open-mouthed in 1921 listening to Oliver at Chicago's Dreamland Café. A 14-year-old Benny Goodman came to hear the Oliver band at Chicago's Lincoln Gardens in 1923. Lester Young went on the road with Oliver before Young had earned any reputation. And Louis Armstrong, whom Oliver brought to Chicago from New Orleans in 1922, would turn jazz into a soloist's art and revolutionize pop singing. Yet Joe Oliver died in poverty, like one of the dispossessed we glimpse daily in our towns and cities.

Sources on his early years are scarce, but our best evidence tells us that Joseph Oliver was born in 1885, about 50 miles up the Mississippi from New Orleans, near the town of Donaldsonville, in a hamlet called Aben (situated on "a bend" in the river). During Oliver's day, Donaldsonville (the capital of Louisiana for one year—1830) was a busy and developed river port.

Other well-known New Orleans musicians, including the trombonist Kid Ory and the bassist Pops Foster, hailed from the same area, known as the River Road, their homemade music born on plantations. Oliver would later play in Crescent City bands with both Foster and Ory.

Joe Oliver was no prodigy. Shortly after he moved with his family to New Orleans—around 1900—he joined a young people's band and immediately hit a wall. The band director started him on trombone, but one source reports he "blew so loud that his teacher switched him (to cornet) in defense of everybody's eardrums." Oliver's own family said he was a slow learner. Yet the trombonist Preston Jackson, who knew him in Chicago, recalled that Joe used to practice very hard. "[Joe] once told me that it took him ten years to get a tone on his instrument," Jackson said. Oliver reached a watershed one night around 1911. Playing at Abadie's Cafe in the heart of the red-light district—the famous "Storyville," also called the District—he watched as his chief rival on the cornet, Freddie Keppard, drew crowds into Pete Lala's Café down the street, while Abadie's stood empty. Fed up, Oliver turned to his pianist and bandleader, Richard M. Jones, and told him to "get into B-flat." Oliver walked outside and started trumpeting into the night. The music floated down Marais Street, and before dawn broke, practically all of Keppard's audience had drifted over to Abadie's. "From then on, our place was full every night," Jones remembered.

For the next seven years or so, Oliver played in District cabarets; with the Magnolia, Melrose, and Onward brass bands; at uptown halls; and at Tulane University dances. He was in such demand that he

Oliver walked outside and started trumpeting into the night. As music floated down the street, people drifted over to Abadie's.

King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band performs at a Chicago White Sox game, 1918.

quit the job he had taken as a butler and began playing cornet full-time, an unusual break for a black New Orleans musician of the day. Most of them held down day jobs as plasterers, draymen, cigar makers, longshoremen, and the like.

One night in 1916 Oliver found himself booked simultaneously for gigs with the Magnolia Band and at Pete Lala's Café. His reputation was on the line. The guitarist John St. Cyr, who would later participate in seminal recordings with Oliver, told him he knew someone who could substitute at one of the venues. This is when Oliver, about 31 years of age, met a talented 15-year-old street kid who secretly worshiped him, following him in parades and shadowing him during his District gigs.

Three years earlier, Louis Armstrong—known in the neighborhood as "Dipper," short for Dippermouth, and later as "Satchmo," short for Satchelmouth—had already begun making noise. Around South Rampart Street, the heart of black New Orleans, guns and knives, fights and killings were commonplace. In early January 1913, Louis was arrested and sent to the New Orleans Colored Waif's Home. He had celebrated the New Year by shooting off his stepfather's revolver. He became the Home's bugler, and then played cornet in the band. Within a year, 13-year-old Louis was leading the band.

In a foreshadowing of events to come, Armstrong took over for Oliver at Pete Lala's that night in 1916. He would later recall that none of the older New Orleans musicians was ever as kind to him as Oliver was.

After leaving the Waif's Home, Louis began running errands for Oliver's wife, Stella. In return, Oliver gave the boy lessons, and Stella would have him in for meals. Stella laughingly recalled Armstrong and her husband at the dinner table, grabbing for the last ham hock in the red beans and rice. "Those two boys had a lot of fun together," she reminisced in an oral history archived at Tulane University. And Armstrong remembered, "Joe Oliver as well as myself felt that we were very close relatives." Before he left New Orleans, Oliver had Louis fill in for him with the Ory and Oliver Band at Pete Lala's. It had been Ory who pronounced Joe Oliver a "King"—the latest in a succession of Crescent City cornet royalty.

In June 1918 the Ory and Oliver Band was filling the house at the Winter Garden on South Rampart. A rival club owner, envious of the Winter Garden's business and undoubtedly using political connections, called the police, who arrested everyone at the Garden for disturbing the peace. Until that time, Oliver had wanted to stay in New Orleans, even turning down good offers from Chicago, which was becoming the new jazz mecca. But the arrest turned the tide.

Within three months Oliver went north to join fellow New Orleans musicians who were leading Chicago dance bands. He immediately lined up two steady gigs, at the Royal Gardens, which could accommodate some 800 customers, and the equally large Dreamland Café. For the moment, he had fallen into a good thing. Chicago, with plenty of jobs in the railroads, steel mills, and stockyards, a burgeoning South Side, and a relatively tolerant racial climate, was

In Chicago Oliver surrounded himself with the best of New Orleans' expatriate musicians, including 21-year-old Louis Armstrong.

becoming the land of promise for Southern blacks. Oliver's Dreamland stint would last at least two years. In 1922 he returned to Chicago from a yearlong California sojourn to play again at the Royal Gardens, now under new ownership and renamed the Lincoln Gardens. There, he surrounded himself with the best of the New Orleans expatriate musicians and renamed his group King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band. In an unexpected move, he sent to New Orleans for the 21-year-old Armstrong, whom he hadn't seen much of for four years. Oliver didn't have to hire Louis; his horn already ruled Chicago.

One of more than 30 recordings Oliver made with Louis Armstrong in 1923.

But Oliver had come from the New Orleans brass band culture, really an orchestra tradition, in which the ensemble prevailed over the soloist. Coming up under Oliver's influence and having followed brass bands through the streets of New Orleans, Louis knew the early jazz repertory and understood Oliver's approach. Almost from the first night at the Lincoln Gardens, mentor and disciple worked up a system of cornet breaks during which they seemed to read each other's mind. The drummer George Wettling saw them there. "I don't know how they knew what was coming up next, but they would play those breaks and never miss," he said in a 1944 interview in *Life* magazine. "Joe would stand there fingering his horn with his right hand and working his mute with his left, and how he would rock the place. Unless you were lucky enough to hear that band in the flesh you can't imagine how they played and what swing they got. After they would knock everybody out with about forty minutes of 'High Society,' Joe would look down at me and wink and then say, 'Hotter than a forty-five.'"

In April 1923 the Creole Jazz Band began recording what would be the first substantial body of black New Orleans jazz. In all, they cut some 30 titles over nine months. These include Oliver's benchmark jazz compositions—"Dipper Mouth Blues," "Canal Street Blues"—as well as classics by Armstrong, such as "Weather Bird Rag." These recordings are among the first to show us what this radical music would have sounded like at its inception.

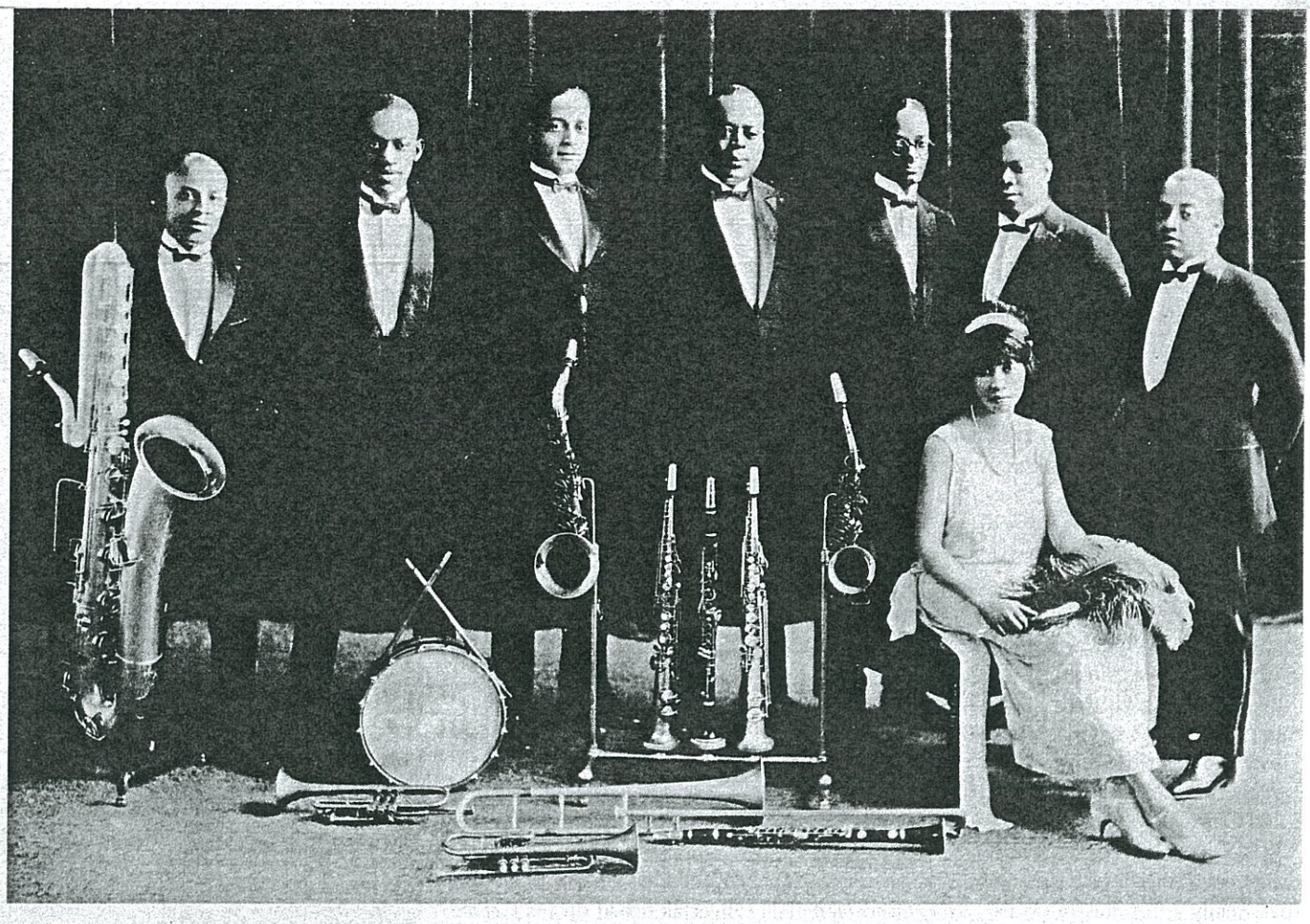
The guitarist Eddie Condon recalled the band: "It was hypnosis at first hearing. Notes I had never heard were peeling off the edges and dropping through the middle; there was a tone from the trumpets like warm rain on a cold day."

And yet, several of his contemporaries insist that the Oliver as heard on his Creole Band recordings comes nowhere close to the way he sounded at Abadie's, Pete Lala's, and other New Orleans honky-tonks 10 years before.

It may be that the recording quality achievable in 1923 couldn't begin to approximate a live performance. But it is also true that chewing tobacco and poor eating habits caused Oliver to develop the gum disease that sabotaged his technique and even his ability to play at all.

The Creole Band recordings caused a transformation in Oliver. Dodds remembered: "When I first joined the band it was called 'Our Band.' After we commenced recording, and making so much money, Joe said, 'This is my band.'" Soon most of the players left him, complaining of not being paid.

These were not the first money troubles, nor the last. Back in New Orleans, Oliver had been accused of embezzling funds intended to pay for the Magnolia Band's uniforms. Later, he would turn down a succession of bookings because he didn't like the pay.



Oliver (center) and his band, 1924; Lil Hardin sits in front of Armstrong, her husband.

Although other players left, Louis Armstrong stayed with the Oliver band. But as much as he felt he needed "Papa Joe," the band's pianist and Armstrong's new wife, Lillian Hardin, had other ideas. Oliver privately had told her that Louis could outplay him but that "as long as I keep him with me, he won't be able to get ahead of me." Lil finally understood Oliver's intentions when the band began recording at the Gennett Studios in Richmond, Indiana. In this early process the musicians played into an array of large funnel-shaped "horns," receivers that conducted the sound through pipes to a cutting stylus and onto a copper-plated master. The only way to obtain a proper balance of sound was to place each player at an appropriate distance from the receivers. The closer anyone stood, the louder his sound on playback.

At first Oliver and Armstrong stood together. But on the playback, Armstrong clearly overpowered Oliver. "You couldn't hear no Joe's playing," Lil recalled, "so they moved Louis way over in a corner," 15 feet behind Oliver. The feisty Lil laid it on the line: "You can't be married to Joe and married to me, too," she told Armstrong. So in the spring of 1924, he parted ways with Oliver and set out on his own. Within months, he would land a New York job with Fletcher Henderson, an early innovator of big-band music. Armstrong was on his way up.

Oliver was not. Summoning more players from New Orleans, he held the Creole Band together until Christmas Eve of 1924, when a fire destroyed the Lincoln Gardens.

He brought a new band, the Dixie Syncopators, into the Plantation Café. Like the Lincoln Gardens, this was a "black-and-tan" club, where crowds of blacks and whites mingled, danced, and enjoyed the music of top black bands. At the Plantation, the Dixie Syncopators made some waves. "If you haven't heard Oliver and his boys, you haven't heard real jazz," said a 1926 *Variety* review. "It is loud, wailing and pulsating. You dance calmly for a while, trying to fight it, and then you succumb completely."

Despite bad times, Oliver refused a job at New York's Cotton Club because the pay was too low; it went to a young Duke Ellington.

The Plantation gig lasted two years. But the club had attracted a rough clientele, which brought police raids. At the same time, white reformist groups had sought to bring down the mixed-race black-and-tans. On March 31, 1927, fire struck the Plantation and Oliver was out on the street.

He set out for New York City, but his band scored only one success—two weeks at the Savoy Ballroom. He had held back and come too late, a decade after leaving New Orleans and nearly five years after the Creole Band recordings. Now all the New York musicians copied Oliver's sound. And network radio, born with the creation of NBC in 1926, wanted arranged, melodic music, not "hot breaks and tricks."

Despite bad times, Oliver refused a job at New York's Cotton Club because he thought the pay was too low. It went instead to a rising young bandleader named Duke Ellington. Then his gum problems grew worse, and his teeth were extracted. After that, Oliver couldn't always honor requests to play his recorded hits because his lip wasn't able to handle the old solos. This would make any cornetist want to dig a hole and crawl into it.

During the 1930s Oliver's increasingly rickety bands traveled the South in old buses and failing cars. Between February 1934 and June 1935 alone, they did almost 300 one-nighters. They would go into a town with no place to stay, and his players continually left him. Yet Oliver seemed to take it in stride: He "was one of the best-dispositioned guys I've ever met in my life," according to one of his sidemen, quoted in Laurie Wright's biography *"King" Oliver*.

In 1937 Louis Armstrong passed through Savannah, Georgia, on tour. Taking a walk one day, he encountered a shabbily dressed old-timer selling vegetables on West Broad Street. He didn't recognize him at first, but it was Joe Oliver. He had been stranded there for more than a year, ailing and without money for medical care. "I gave him about $150 I had in my pocket, and Luis Russell and Red Allen, Pops Foster, Albert Nicholas, Paul Barbarin—all used to be his boys—they gave him what they had," Armstrong recalled in a 1966 interview.

Armstrong's group played a dance that night, and Oliver turned out for it: "We look over and there's Joe standing in the wings. He was sharp like the old Joe Oliver of 1915. He'd been to the pawnshop and gotten his fronts all back, you know, his suits and all—Stetson hat turned down, high-button shoes, his box-back coat. He looked beautiful and he had a wonderful night, just listening to us—talking. It'd been a long time since I'd seen Joe—not since 1926. But the devotion was there and every time I had a chance, I'd lay something on him. But I didn't have too much myself. Wasn't making but $75 a night."

Not long after that happy evening, on a spring day in 1938, in his fifties, Joe Oliver died penniless, sick, and alone in a backroom in Savannah. Yet he had never lost hope. Months before he died, he wrote to his sister Victoria in New York: "I am not the one to give up quick. If I was I don't know where I would be today. I always feel like I've got a chance. I still feel I'm going to snap out of the rut I've been in for several years. . . . Look like every time one door close on me another door open. . . ."

Years later in his own memoir, the Creole Band drummer Baby Dodds recalled the band's days at the Lincoln Gardens. "The Oliver band played for the comfort of the people," wrote Dodds. "Sometimes the band played so softly you could hardly hear it, but still you knew the music was going. We played so soft that you could often hear the people's feet dancing."

In the end, the pulsing, breathing sound Joseph "King" Oliver brought out of New Orleans became an invaluable gift to American music. Joe Oliver let the cat out of the bag, and that cat is swinging still. ☙

Peter Gerler, a writer and musician in Boston, is currently working on a book about Joe "King" Oliver.