

## Prologue

On September 8, 1935, a nineteen-year-old Frank Sinatra made his radio debut on the *Major Bowes' Amateur Hour* as the tenor in an all-male vocal quartet called the Hoboken Four.<sup>1</sup> Sinatra was new to the group – the trio had previously been called The Three Flashes – and legend has it that it was his mother, Dolly Sinatra, who persuaded them to add her son shortly before the competition. Only recently released commercially, the recording of this debut is generally only known by the most die-hard Sinatra fans and scholars.<sup>2</sup> The performance is far from remarkable. Still, it offers a window on a period of music unfamiliar to many listeners today.

Typical for the era, the recording begins with a bit of jaunty banter. The Major himself, Edward Bowes, serves as the show's master of ceremonies, and as he notes in his introduction: "We have now The Hoboken Four. They call themselves the singing and dancing fools."

When Bowes asks who serves as spokesman for the group, Sinatra jumps in, "I will. I'm Frank. We're looking for jobs. How 'bout it?" he asks charismatically in a thick, New Jersey accent.

The studio audience laughs, but Sinatra isn't deterred. "Everyone who's ever heard us, liked it," he declares, and to prove his point the quartet breaks into a rendition of "Shine," a tune made famous by Louis Armstrong:<sup>3</sup>

'Cause, my hair is curly  
'Cause, my teeth are pearly  
Just because I always wear a smile  
Like to dress up ...

Bing Crosby and the Mills Brothers, an African American vocal quartet, recorded a jazz rendition of "Shine" in 1932 that clearly served as the model for The Hoboken Four's performance.<sup>4</sup> Sinatra often claimed that hearing Crosby on the radio in the early 1930s influenced his own early attempts at singing, and one can clearly hear it on this recording. Sinatra's voice, like Crosby's, floats above the others. He sings separately from his three colleagues, mimicking their lyrics and singing smart-aleck remarks after each line. His voice is high and vibrant, and his phrasing clipped. Only at the bridge, when he breaks into a brief passage of spirited scat singing

influenced by the Mills Brothers' style, does a sense of rhythmic finesse and vocal virtuosity break through. It's not the Frank Sinatra so easily recognizable today – not the iconic singer millions eventually grew to know and love. Instead, we hear an inexperienced kid trying to imitate both Bing Crosby and the Mills Brothers – performers he'd heard on records, on the radio and in the cinema. Crosby's performance drew attention to an African American jazz sound made famous by performers like Louis Armstrong and the Mills Brothers. Sinatra's performance was little more than an imitation of Crosby imitating African American jazz.

Four years passed before Sinatra was recorded again: first on a demo recording of "Our Love" with the Frank Mane Orchestra, and then a few months later on a string of recordings with the Harry James Orchestra. These performances feature a markedly different sound – the warm, lyrical voice and nuanced phrasing we all readily recognize as the young Frank Sinatra. There is little trace of Crosby or the Mills Brothers. No more clipped phrases or driving scat solos. Instead, one hears the Sinatra whose meteoric rise as "The Voice" made him an essential element in the soundscape that defined World War II America. Hearing these recordings, one cannot help but ask: What happened in the four years between The Hoboken Four and Harry James? Where did Sinatra find his iconic sound? Who influenced him, and why? What cultural phenomena, if any, played a role in the creation of a musical style that so many today describe as emblematically American? Teasing out the answers to these questions was the first step in my journey of doing research for this book; and like much research, the answers I found were rarely the ones I expected. Indeed, three and a half years in Italy and the sources I encountered there caused me to stray from my original path of mid-century American culture and venture into the broader, less-trodden realm of transnational jazz.

I should confess from the beginning that this book is not about Frank Sinatra, at least not specifically. Rather, it is an exploration of a musical world that deeply influenced Sinatra but was largely erased from memory after World War II. This book is about Italian jazz, from its origins in New Orleans, to Fascist Italy and beyond. In this book, I take a wide view of jazz, from turn-of-the-century genres like the cakewalk and ragtime to the later arrival of big band swing. In short, the concept of jazz, as discussed in this study, encompasses not only improvised music played by small ensembles, but also dance music and popular songs that incorporated the syncopated rhythms and characteristic performance styles most commonly associated with jazz. *Jazz Italian Style* introduces readers to a genre of vocal swing that evolved in Italy and emerged out of a rich texture of transatlantic

experiences. This was a style of music markedly different in its orchestration from American models. It was a style of music that filtered the influences of American jazz through a prism of highbrow Italian lyricism and lowbrow North Italian folk music. And perhaps most surprising to Anglo American readers, it was a style of music that eventually influenced singers in the United States.

Italian jazz found its voice in the 1930s, and by the middle of the decade its influence had reached across the Atlantic. In fact, the iconic American sound we now associate with performers like the Andrews Sisters and Frank Sinatra clearly arose in dialogue with innovative performances by the most famous singers in Italy under Mussolini's watch, namely, the Trio Lescano and Natalino Otto.

The year 2015 marked the centennial of Frank Sinatra's birth, and over the course of those twelve months, countless new documentaries and publications appeared exploring the allure of the Sinatra sound. Missing from those discussions, however, was a description of the soundscapes that characterized the Italian American communities that Sinatra would have known during the first half of the twentieth century, and the ways in which recorded sound facilitated a constant interaction between these communities in the United States and the music and film industries in Fascist Italy. Jazz played an important role in the culture of Italy's greater diaspora, and Italians on both sides of the Atlantic, including Sinatra, were swept up almost immediately by its dynamic sounds and the symbols it appeared to offer. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than the release in 1917 of what most American scholars and musicians now reluctantly acknowledge to be the first commercial jazz recording: "Dixie Jass Band One-Step" and "Livery Stable Blues" by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. The lack of enthusiasm behind the scholarly world's acceptance of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band has little to do with the ensemble's performance or talent. Rather, the reluctance concerns the race of these musicians: all five were white, and two of them – the band's founder and trumpeter, Nick LaRocca and drummer Tony Sbarbaro – were of Italian origin. For many scholars, the inconvenient truth of this milestone in the history of jazz is understandable. Jazz grew out of African American culture, and the honor of being "first" should have gone to a black ensemble. In later years, LaRocca only made matters worse by repeatedly declaring, in disturbingly racist language, that jazz was not indebted to African American culture at all. Let me be clear on this point: LaRocca was wrong. At its core, jazz is an art form that originated in America in the hands of African American musicians. There is no disputing this fact. But what originally made jazz so appealing to so many

people around the globe was the mesmerizing synthesis of *all* its musical characteristics, the genesis of which could be linked to various ethnicities, including Italian.

As jazz developed in New Orleans during the 1910s, listeners became captivated by its upbeat, syncopated energy, which in turn made it ripe for commercialization via the latest recording technologies. Nick LaRocca didn't invent jazz, but he was the first to capitalize on the fact that it was a financially profitable, popular art form that could cross various ethnic and national borders with relative ease. False though it was, LaRocca's claim that he invented jazz played an influential role in Italy's early embrace of the music. And as the decades progressed, developing a distinctive genre of Italian jazz became important to many artists and political leaders in Italy. Even when Italy and the United States found themselves on opposite sides during World War II, jazz remained an important element in the Italian consciousness on both sides of the Atlantic. Consequently, a central goal of this book, and one of the things that makes it distinct from other jazz histories, is its exploration of these transnational connections. Most importantly, I am interested in investigating how "extra-musical" phenomena – politics, immigration patterns, economics and technology – influenced both the development of Italian jazz and its eventual demise.

Over the last decade, numerous studies have appeared describing the early reception of jazz in various European countries.<sup>5</sup> In England, France and Germany, jazz was defined as a "foreign" art form, "exotic" in nature, with indelible connections to African American culture. In the case of Germany specifically, jazz was eventually banned by the Nazi regime, which labeled it a "degenerate" and corrupting cultural force. *Jazz Italian Style* offers the first Anglo American study of Italian jazz, and until now, most scholars have simply assumed, due to the political alliances of World War II, that the reception of jazz in Fascist Italy mirrored what happened in Germany. Not so. Jazz flourished in Italy thanks to Mussolini's support, and the story of its development there is no less fascinating or important than the histories of jazz in other European nations. That said, I must admit that telling the story of Italian jazz can be difficult and even painful at times.

When jazz arrived on Italian shores at the conclusion of World War I, it was embraced, at least in part, as a "native" art form. The Futurists praised its "virile energy," Mussolini described it as "the voice of Italian youth," and musicians, mesmerized by its "progressive" sounds, left the conservatories and flocked to dance halls and nightclubs. Of course, jazz had its early detractors in Italy, just as it did in the United States, but in Italy, the music

was embraced early on as a sign of youth and modernization. In Italy, the gramophone and radio served as modern-day messengers, and thanks to this technology, most Italian listeners could enjoy the music without having to contemplate the ethnic identities of its performers or composers. Consequently, Nick LaRocca (Italian American), Gorni Kramer (Italian), the Trio Lescano (Jewish Dutch) and Louis Armstrong (African American), to name just a few, all found their place in the Italian soundscape.

Mussolini's alliance with Hitler and the devastating civil war that erupted in Italy shortly thereafter led to a conscious erasure after World War II of this era in jazz history. Although several Italian scholars have worked hard to preserve the music and describe the performances of its greatest singers and instrumentalists, few have focused on the importance of Italy/US relations during this era, and none have confronted the uncomfortable fact that many jazz musicians contributed to the Fascist cause by supplying a soundtrack that endorsed Mussolini's government. Instead, previous scholars have tended to describe Italian jazz as a failed experiment whose practitioners were apolitical and whose influence ended with Mussolini's implementation of Italy's race laws in 1938. The present study offers a markedly different point of view: Italian jazz flourished until the end of World War II because Mussolini supported it. And when he was executed, many Italian musicians began rewriting their own stories in an effort to forget the uneasy relationships that they had forged with Fascist policies and practices.

I should note that the story of jazz in Italy is filled with dark moments and disconcerting events that at times reflect unflattering images of both American and Italian culture. Looking back on these episodes can be distressing and even shocking at times. This is no doubt the primary reason why the cultural history of Italian jazz has been overlooked for so many years. In Italy, hindsight and a sense of national remorse over the legacy of Mussolini have minimized the desire among scholars and musicians to dredge up the uncomfortable connections between jazz and the Fascist regime.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the Cold War cultural propaganda that promoted jazz as a symbol of democracy in the United States left no room for discussions concerning Italian influences, especially those associated with the cultural policies of Fascism.

I realize that in many ways I am coming to this topic as an outsider, and perhaps that's a good thing. I did not witness the historical era under discussion, and despite my last name, I did not grow up in an Italian American family. So I do not have a stake in the game other than as a musicologist. My grandfather worked briefly as a jazz musician, and he and my mother instilled in me a love of big band swing. That's how I got started on my quest

for the origins of the Sinatra sound. What I found along the way was the narrative presented in the chapters of this book.

*Jazz Italian Style* explores a complex era in music history, when politics and popular culture collided with national identity and technology. The book recovers a lost repertoire and an array of musicians whose stories and performances are compelling and well worth remembering. This is why, in addition to the book, I have compiled a set of playlists titled Listening to *Jazz Italian Style*, which is available on the book's Resources page at [www.cambridge.org/9781107169777](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107169777).

## 1 | Italians and the Origins of Jazz

The story of Italian jazz begins, interestingly enough, with a description of the American music industry penned by an Italian diplomat. In August 1919 Chevalier Bruno Zuculin published a somewhat glib, yet telling, description of the New Orleans jazz scene in *La Lettura*, a monthly illustrated supplement to *Corriere della Sera*, Italy's most widely read newspaper at the time.

There are two categories of jazz bands: those that are mostly black, which perform in the hotels, restaurants, dance halls and social clubs; and those, often Italian, that play in the cinemas, in variety shows and in those numerous theaters where the most genuine theatrical product of North America flourishes, namely the entertaining productions called "Musical Comedies" or "Girls and Music Shows," wherein the plot, if it exists at all, is of little importance to anyone, and the success of the performance is based primarily on the quality of the music and the beauty of the girls.<sup>1</sup>

Zuculin was reporting directly from New Orleans, where he had been serving as Italy's Consul General for just over a year.<sup>2</sup> Although the above quote is only a small excerpt from his lengthy "Musiche e danze americane" (American Musics and Dances), it serves as a useful point of departure for this chapter's discussion of Italy's contributions, both real and perceived, to the origins of jazz.

Zuculin's description of New Orleans has been largely overlooked by previous scholars, who generally refer to Ernest Ansermet's "Sur une orchestra nègre" as the first overview of American jazz written by a European.<sup>3</sup> Yet Zuculin's article predates by two months Ansermet's description in *La revue romande* of Will Marion Cook's Southern Syncopated Orchestra. Even more importantly, whereas Ansermet describes a concert in Switzerland performed for a European audience by a traveling ensemble, Zuculin offers an on-the-spot report of the music scene in New Orleans. He was the first to state, quite emphatically, that Italian immigrants played a role in the genesis of jazz in the United States, and it was this belief, perhaps more than anything else, that later drove many Italians, including Mussolini, to embrace the music as a "native" art form.

Zuculin identified two types of jazz bands in New Orleans, each of which could be distinguished from the other in three distinct ways: by race, by nationality, and by the various venues that hosted their performances. While he linked the American “black” bands to the city’s “hotels, restaurants, dance halls and social clubs,” where they were expected to supply traditional dance music, he associated the white, “often Italian,” bands with the commercialization of jazz as found in the cinema and music halls, where success was linked not just to the music, but also to film and the draw of “beautiful girls.” Zuculin described Italian bands as pushing jazz toward modernity. In their hands, the music mixed with technology and beauty to the joy and titillation of seated spectators. “Black” jazz was for dancing. “Italian” jazz was the new listening music of the modern age.

Where did this distinction between American tradition and Italian modernization come from? Was Zuculin disingenuous in his description of Italians’ activities abroad, or was there some truth in his assessment that has since been overlooked or cast aside by historians? The answers to questions such as these begin to emerge when we step back in history several more decades and examine the social and cultural interactions that took place between Italians and other ethnic groups in various cities in the United States – namely, New Orleans, New York, San Francisco and Chicago – during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

## New Orleans

New Orleans is the birthplace of jazz – most scholars and fans agree on this point – and since the city’s founding by the French in 1718, it has served as an ethnic melting pot. Today one often speaks of the city’s Creole and Cajun cultures and the strong presence of African Americans, be they former slaves, the descendants of free men of color or emigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America. But during the nineteenth century, New Orleans also welcomed a vast array of European emigrants – Irish, Germans, Slavs, Italians – and it was out of this cultural mix of African American, Caribbean and European, at the dawn of the twentieth century, that jazz as we know it evolved.

One issue that complicates descriptions of early New Orleans jazz is the shifting parameters of race designations during the second half of the nineteenth century. Before the Civil War, race was not polarized into black and white in New Orleans. The term “creole,” for example, was originally used to identify individuals (be they of mixed race or white) who were born in



Louisiana but descended from colonial French or Spanish settlers. After the Civil War, however, legislative efforts to clarify various racial categories led to the eventual practice of using the word creole to refer exclusively to people of wholly European descent, and describing all others as creoles of color.<sup>4</sup> The division of race was further polarized in 1896, when the Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* categorized all African Americans, including creoles of color, under the singular designation of “Negro.” Consequently, many historians have described the formative years of early New Orleans jazz in terms of black and white, dividing ensembles along strict racial lines into those made up of African American performers and those limited to white musicians. But in truth, Jim Crow laws and the new legal designations did not racially divide the New Orleans music community right away. Prior to 1900, those who had been designated as creoles of color moved easily between the realms of black and white, often performing in ensembles of both racial distinctions. In short, the makeup of many early New Orleans brass bands included musicians from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Italy’s link to New Orleans dates back to the seventeenth century, when explorers like Henri de Tonti took part in the early European settlement of the region.<sup>5</sup> But the contributions of Italians to the city’s musical culture did not begin in earnest until the nineteenth century, when singers and instrumentalists were recruited to perform in the city’s newly constructed French Opera House, which opened in 1859 and stood at the corner of Bourbon and Toulouse Streets in the French Quarter.<sup>6</sup> Few in number, these Italians tended to be conservatory trained. Most arrived in New Orleans via South America and the Caribbean, and although they generally only remained in the city for several months at a time, they nonetheless participated in the practice of racial integration that characterized the New Orleans music scene. At the French Opera, which served as a destination for tourists until it burned down in 1919, European musicians performed side by side in the orchestra pit and on the stage with professionally trained creoles of color. Although these Italian musicians likely had little direct contact with the genesis of jazz, the local creole musicians who remained in New Orleans embraced Italian music, taking pride in the fact that their opera company was one of the finest in the country and the site for numerous US premieres of works by Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti. This appreciation for Italian opera was passed on to their children and grandchildren, who later performed in the city’s earliest ragtime bands.<sup>7</sup> By the time the first major wave of Italian immigrants began arriving in New Orleans after the Civil War, popular arias from Italian opera had become part of the city’s cultural fabric

and, consequently, served as some of the most common tunes “ragged” by New Orleans brass bands. Even Louis Armstrong was known to use quotes from Italian opera arias in the solos of some of his earliest recordings.<sup>8</sup>

Between 1880 and 1920, over four million Italians immigrated to the United States, and the majority came from Italy’s southern regions – Sicily, Campania, Abruzzi and Calabria – areas that were largely agricultural, impoverished and overpopulated at the time. New Orleans served as a preferred destination for this large wave of immigrants, who differed in many ways from the trained musicians who had arrived in the city several decades earlier. Poor and often illiterate, the majority of this second wave arrived on the cargo boats out of Naples and Palermo that transported foodstuffs to the United States and shipments of cotton and tobacco back to Italy. According to the US census, roughly 950 Italian immigrants lived in New Orleans in 1850. By the 1890s as many as 30,000 Italians were living and working in the city, and 90 percent of these were from Sicily.<sup>9</sup> The population continued to grow through the turn of the century, so that, by 1910, a walk through the French Quarter revealed a veritable Italian colony, where upward of 80 percent of the neighborhood was Italian.

What drew these immigrants to New Orleans? More than anything, it was the promise of economic reward. Italy’s southern regions had suffered centuries of economic hardship, and the unification of Italy in 1861 brought the implementation of new economic measures to the South, which impoverished the region even further. The heavy taxes needed to balance the national budget created enormous discontent and division among the populations of Italy’s northern and southern regions. While the wealthy industrial cities of Milan, Turin and Genoa expanded substantially after unification, the agricultural centers in the South, and most noticeably Sicily, remained economically disadvantaged. By the 1880s, these dire economic circumstances were exacerbated even further by a global depression. As Mark Choate explains in his compelling history of Italian emigration, this is when the Italian government began to mount an active campaign to encourage its poorest citizens to move to the United States. The goal of this mass emigration was to relieve the overpopulation and unemployment in Italy’s southern regions and thus simultaneously improve the economic prospects of Italians both at home and abroad. By 1900, the Italian government “had developed a flexible set of programs to establish a network of culture, trade, and exchange with Italians outside of Italy’s territory and legal reach.”<sup>10</sup> Emigration was not perceived as a sign of disloyalty, national abandonment or economic failure, but instead was viewed as a public service of sorts. As Choate explains, toward the end of the nineteenth century,