

What gave early New Orleans jazz clarinets their unique sound?

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The hauntingly beautiful "wailing" sounds of early New Orleans jazz clarinets, often featured in brass bands or jazz funerals, are one of the most distinctive instrument styles in American music. The unique sound begs the question: What's behind incredible their range of sound and tonal variety?

During the 174th Meeting of the Acoustical Society of America, being held Dec. 4-8, 2017, in New Orleans, Louisiana, Michael G. White from Xavier University of New Orleans will deliver a special presentation about the distinguishing characteristics of the clarinet in early New Orleans jazz.

White was inspired as a child to play the clarinet by his aunt who had played throughout her early life and occasionally played around the house. "I loved the [sound](#) of the instrument and the joy that was on her face as she played," he said. "I was also inspired by the very rich musical environment of my native New Orleans, and started playing traditional New Orleans Jazz in college after having played in high school and taken lessons for three years."

White especially liked the role of the clarinet, and the "unique Afro-clarinet tradition of New Orleans, with its characteristic rich, full, singing—yet very individual [tone](#) possibilities. I was fortunate to have had a long musical and personal association with more than three dozen active early jazz musicians born before 1910—some as far back as the late 1890s. These contemporaries of Louis Armstrong became my

friends, mentors, band mates, and were a constant source of inspiration."

The clarinet is a straight, cylindrical tube typically 23.5 inches long, made up of four parts and a mouthpiece. "Sound is produced by blowing through the mouthpiece, which has an attached reed," said White.

"Different tones are produced by covering or uncovering a number of keys and holes with the fingers. The sound of the clarinet is affected by many factors, including internal bore shape and size, how the tone holes are cut, the size and shape of the mouthpiece, reeds and ligatures, and the oral cavity and throat of the individual player and their method of blowing."

The clarinet's unique sound in early New Orleans jazz comes from the size and shape of the instrument, reed and mouthpiece. "The type of clarinet most widely used today in orchestras, jazz bands, and school groups is the 'Boehm System,' which although easier to negotiate technically, seems to be less flexible than the Albert in bending and producing a singing tone," White said. "My goal has been to try to produce an Albert-like tone on a Boehm clarinet."

From a musical standpoint, this work represents the continuation and extension of the New Orleans creole clarinet tradition, one that was foundational to of all jazz reed instrument playing.

Over the years, White has achieved a tone with a more characteristic Albert/early jazz sound than most post-1940 clarinetists. "I've constantly experimented to improve clarinet tone—and to make the Boehm sound more like an Albert—through various equipment combinations and the use of new and innovative devices and techniques," he said. "Along the way I noticed some surprising things, like how tongue position affects tone by controlling the speed and focus of airflow."

He's also involved in preliminary studies to sonically measure the tones

of several early jazz clarinetists to attempt to discover and analyze the specific qualities of each individual's tone in terms of harmonics and perceived fullness or thinness in various registers.

White hopes to share his work of further refining clarinet tone in a new book of guidelines, studies and practice tips for clarinetists as a way to offer a wider range and spectrum of sound possibilities than the rather narrow and limited range that is often heard today.

More information: Abstract: 3aMU1: "Signal Analysis of New Orleans Jazz Clarinet Sounds," by Joshua Veillon, Juliette W. Ioup and Michael White, Dec. 6, 2017, in Studio 4 in the New Orleans Marriott. asa2017fall.abstractcentral.com/s/u/f5Ys71CdjIE

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