

THE PREOCCUPATIONS OF MR. LOMAX,  
INVENTOR OF THE “INVENTOR OF JAZZ”

BY

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Fans and students of jazz recently received a long-delayed inheritance in the form of Rounder Records’ deluxe release of Alan Lomax’s 1938 interviews of Jelly Roll Morton for the Library of Congress (*Jelly Roll Morton: The Complete Library of Congress Recordings by Alan Lomax*, 2005). Portions of these interviews have been released in various forms over the years, but never have the results of the project been so comprehensively available to the public. Probably the best-known of the interviews’ previous incarnations was Lomax’s 1950 book *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and “Inventor of Jazz.”* Adapted from conversations with Morton and others, *Mister Jelly Roll* presents, ostensibly, the story of Morton’s life and the early days of jazz in the musician’s own words, interspersed with reflections from Morton’s colleagues and loved ones. Lomax describes his editing of the interview materials, which took him over a decade to complete, as “aimed to transfer the surge of speech into the quieter flow of type” (xv) and to “polish...this earthy spoken prose so that the reader could feel the presence of the speakers while turning the pages” (xiv). But this explanation is far from accurate: on close inspection, a number of far more forceful manipulations are apparent in the text.

In his Afterword to the 2001 edition of the book, Lawrence Gushee calls the project “the synthesis—or perhaps the collision—of two agendas” (*MJR* 320). The description is apt. While Morton attempts to use the interviews to recharge his

career and, meanwhile, secure for posterity due credit for the creators of jazz, Lomax, in his book, frequently imposes his own schema. Rounder's recent release—which in addition to the complete recordings, offers extensive transcripts of interviews both recorded and unrecorded, research notes, correspondence, and other relevant documents—affords new opportunities to examine Lomax's translation of the material from the interviews into book form, and in comparing the book to the transcripts and notes, this “translation” process begins to appear more and more suspect. Distortions are abundant in the book, in the form of omissions, alterations, and the voices of Lomax and others working to conform Morton's story to Lomax's own ideas about American culture and folk music. Because of his romantic conceptions of folk culture, Lomax is compelled to attribute to Morton his own preoccupations and adjust Morton's story to fit his own a priori model of authenticity: the racialized, oppressed organic musician whose suffering gives rise to a redeeming creative genius.

As closely as their names are now associated, the pairing of Lomax and Morton was never entirely a natural one. As John Szwed explains in his essay “Dr. Jazz,” (part of the book included in Rounder's release of the interviews):

During his years as a folklorist traveling on his own and with his father [...] Alan Lomax had focused on documenting American traditions in their original settings, relatively undisturbed by the emerging commercial entertainment industry, and he had not really considered recording someone like Jelly Roll Morton. Alan and his

father had written off New Orleans as ‘a barren field for [folk] collection [...]’ [...] “At that time,” Lomax said, “jazz was my worst enemy. Through the forces of radio, it was wiping out the music that I cared about—American traditional folk music.” (Szwed 9)

Lomax believed that “[o]ur western mass-production and communication systems are inadvertently destroying the languages, traditions, cuisines, and creative styles that once gave every people and every locality a distinctive character—indeed their principal reason for living” (*FSSC* 4); he felt the job of folklorists was to “redress the balance a bit” (*Selected Writings* 174), to be “the champions of the ordinary people of the world who aren’t backed up by printing presses, radio chains, and B29’s” (*SW* 115). Lomax very much likes to think of authentic music as possessing great power for musicians and listeners both. Inauthentic music, on the other hand, is in large part responsible for the cultural “grey-out” he sees in progress. For Lomax, jazz epitomized the commercial music against which he defined—and which, he felt, threatened—authentic (i.e., folk) culture.

Of his decision to record Morton, Lomax claims, “I looked at him with considerable suspicion. But I thought, I’d take this cat on, and . . . see how much folk music a jazz musician knows” (qtd. in Szwed 9). Needless to say, the results were worth keeping, and Lomax’s imagination was captured. Lomax recalls that “[t]he first recording began by [my] asking if he knew ‘Alabama Bound.’ He

played me about the most beautiful ‘Alabama Bound’ that I had ever heard” (qtd. in Szwed 9):

He began to play the piano and talk. It came out of nowhere, the fact that he decided to do that. We hadn’t agreed on it at all. Sort of half closing his eyes, he gave that immortal definition of his family, and New Orleans. [...] As I listened to it, I realized that this man spoke the English language in a more beautiful way than anybody I’d ever heard. He had a totally original style . . . . This man who had been associated with gun thugs, living in a very cruel environment . . . . proceeded to speak the most fantastically elegant and sensitive English about culture, and character, and so on . . . . A gravel voice melting at the edges, not talking, each sentence bowling along like a line from the blues. (qtd. in Szwed 11)

This anecdote is revealing of the ways Lomax allows himself to think of Morton (and, to a lesser degree, jazz music) as “authentic” and thereby rationalize the project.<sup>1</sup> The first point of note is Lomax’s initial reaction—he is drawn to the beauty of what Morton plays. From there, Lomax constructs a narrative befitting of his ideas about authentic culture, asserting a connection between depth of emotion

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<sup>1</sup> Lomax’s telling of the project’s origins may or may not be strictly true; as Szwed notes in his booklet, Lomax’s accounts of the project’s origins tend to be “a bit compressed” (12), and in the “Prelude” to *Mister Jelly Roll*, Lomax attributes to himself the suggestion to Morton that he should “maybe keep playing piano while you talk” (xix). In any case, the interviews do not represent an improvised narrative; Morton had prepared various notes and plans for his recordings, some of which are included in the Rounder materials.

(especially suffering), spontaneous genesis, and authentic, organic creation. Morton is a survivor, Lomax reasons; though he once had commercial success, he has been “living in a very cruel environment.” Furthermore, what Morton produces is not calculated, according to Lomax’s telling (it “came out of nowhere”), nor is it simply informative—Morton just “half clos[es] his eyes” and *emotes*; the result is less like speech than “like a line from the blues” (the epitome of authenticity in Lomax’s estimation).<sup>2</sup>

Because Lomax’s conception of authenticity is firmly rooted in the eighteenth-century philosophical ideal,<sup>3</sup> origination in the performer’s emotional self-contact is the most essential criterion of “authentic” music for him. The “Prelude” of *Mister Jelly Roll* is devoted to establishing the emotional credentials of Morton and his narrative. Lomax explains that this was “a new way of writing history...—history with music cues, the music evoking recollection and poignant feeling—history intoned out of the heart of one man, sparkling with dialogue and purple with ego” (xix). Morton’s speech is once again described as “almost...a slow blues” (xix). As for Morton himself, Lomax emphasizes that Morton is no pampered

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<sup>2</sup> Consulting nearly any page of *The Land Where the Blues Began* will quickly confirm for the reader Lomax’s high esteem for the blues; he considers it “America’s most moving song tradition” (*LWBB* 286), among “the most important and original contributions to American folk song” (*SW* 62).

<sup>3</sup> In short, as Charles Taylor explains in *Ethics of Authenticity*, this is the idea articulated by Herder (but also drawing on Rousseau) that “each of us has an original way of being human” and are “called upon to live ... in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s”; this “accords crucial moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature” (Taylor 28-9).

star, but a man who has suffered “[y]ears of poverty and neglect” (xviii)—a “lonely Creole, without a dime in his pockets or a friend in the world” (xviii).

Though suffering and hardship play a very small part in Morton’s narrative, underscoring and exaggerating Morton’s emotional pain is one of Lomax’s primary tactics for validating Morton as an authentic performer. Playing psychologist,<sup>4</sup> Lomax reveals that “notoriety compensated an orphan for the loss of his family and for the painful memories of his mulatto childhood” (105).<sup>5</sup> Where the pathos is not sufficiently intense in Morton’s narration, Lomax kicks it up a notch; for instance, he cuts away from Morton’s account of being expelled from home and adds an “Interlude” describing the scene in more vivid terms:

The boy stood at the gate, hearing the cold snap of the lock inside the door and staring at the pleasant house of his childhood. The early morning sunlight gleamed.... In his mind it became a mansion with fluted columns and a noble broad gallery, a mansion that hides the

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, Szwed quotes Lomax describing the interviews as “almost like an analytic interview (only there is no couch)” (12).

<sup>5</sup> The theme of orphanhood is amazingly prevalent in Lomax’s work. In *The Land Where the Blues Began* he claims that “[t]hose who had been traumatically orphaned and heartbroken early in life became, it seems to me, the most heartfelt wailers later on” (*LBB* 362), that “the itinerant Delta bluesmen” were “[o]rphaned by their society” (362), and that the inmates of Parchman State Penitentiary, where he collected many prison songs, “were like orphans, with both parents dead, left to cruel and indifferent caretakers” (275). Lomax also recounts the childhood guardianship arrangement of nearly every bluesman he deals with in that book, making either apologies or qualifications for those with the misfortune to come from a relatively “stable” family, including Sam Chatmon (362, 385), Bill Broonzy (362, 426), Leadbelly (362), and Muddy Waters (412, 414).



real story-and-a-half house with its narrow porch and its small square columns.

For young Ferdinand Morton the door had closed upon the secure, secret, and confined Creole family life. The beauty and glory of this life...were forever lost to him. Already an orphan, he became a wanderer, searching for a golden world that existed only in the memories and prejudices of respectable old Creole ladies like his grandmother. (27-8)

In fact, even the portion of this story attributed to Morton may have been modified. *Mister Jelly Roll* has Morton recall crossing paths with his great-grandmother (who was his guardian after his mother's death) on his way home from his job playing piano in the Tenderloin. After inquiring as to how much money Morton was earning, he recalls, his grandmother told him, "Your mother is gone and can't help her little girls now. She left Amède and Mimi to their old grandmother to raise as good girls. A musician is nothing but a bum and a scalawag. I don't want you round your sisters. I reckon you better move" (25-6). In the transcript, however, the following note appears:

Uncle Nelusco a drunk and would drink Dago red until he turned blue — his people had lost all their money, moved to poorer section — told them he [Morton] had job in sugar refinery but really piano in sporting houses — family didn't understand how he dressed so well [... ]

Uncle sent Mimi<sup>6</sup> to the grocery store, spit on the floor and said if you aren't back before the spit's dry I'll beat you up — she got back in time but he slapped her down — Jelly Roll went crazy, beat him up, and grandmother sent him away from home — had \$4000 saved up but he didn't know how to rent a room — nearly killed him to be put out — went to godmother's. (Transcript 175)

In this account of what is almost certainly the same event, it is a fight with his uncle which leads Morton's great-grandmother to order him to move; mention is made that Morton has been hiding his livelihood from his family, but this is not the reason for the falling-out. In the final book version, however, Morton has become a sort of martyr for his art, forced to leave his family for the music he loves. It is this kind of suffering which, in Lomax's view, plants the seed of artistic creation (28); his exaggeration of it is his way of establishing Morton's authenticity.

Despite his work at vetting Morton, however, (particularly early in the book,) Lomax's lingering ambivalence is still apparent in many of its details. The centerpiece of *Mister Jelly Roll* is Lomax's theory of jazz as a kind of folk music, after all, a "musical gumbo" of influences rooted in "the folklife of [New Orleans] Creoles" (xxi). Morton helped Lomax see jazz as having the makings of authentic music—being created in a small, local setting by individuals who are in authentic

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<sup>6</sup> Both Morton's great-grandmother and his sister Frances were known by the nickname "Mimi"; the subsequent reference to "grandmother" suggests it is Morton's sister being mentioned here.

contact with themselves—and Lomax goes to considerable effort to highlight these folkish origins of jazz, explaining how

A half century later (after the beginnings of jazz) the lineage of every fine jazz musician can still be traced back to the handful of half caste Creoles, who performed the original act of creation.... All these men knew each other. As boys they followed the parades together or, split into neighborhood gangs and fought bloody rock fights in the alleys. Later they wove together the complex fabric of hot jazz, an American creation at first scorned by the aesthetes and banned by the moralists.

(xx)

But even as he begins to accept jazz as communal, as defiant and nonconformist—certainly as more than commercial (at least initially)—still Lomax can't quite bring himself to accept jazz as entirely authentic. He goes on to say that “[t]oday jazz lends its color to most American music and to a great deal of the popular music of the world, as well” (xx), and this is far from a positive development: “Jazz, in this sense, is one of the marvels of the century—a marvel that has spawned a monster—a monster entertainment industry, feeding upon jazz, growing gigantic and developing a score of interlocking colossal bodies whose million orifices pour out each week the stuff of our bartered dreams” (xxi). To Lomax, jazz started out right, but became an example of what can go wrong; he continues to associate it with that cultural machine which he sees “fill[ing] our human skies with the smog of the phoney and cut[ting] the families of men off from a vision of their own cultural constellations.... imposing

a few standardized, mass-produced and cheapened cultures everywhere” (*FSSC* 4). Jazz has become the “phoney” music which sickens the worlds’ cultures, and it has created a “monster” of an industry to perpetuate and accelerate this process.

Lomax’s conflicted feelings are also manifest even in his more general treatment of race in *Mister Jelly Roll*. Lomax is less interested in understanding Morton’s take on his life or the music<sup>7</sup> than in presenting a picture of jazz as “the product and resolution of painful class tensions between ‘lower’ American Blacks and ‘upper’ French-speaking mulattos” (*MJR* xvi) and a “musical union [which] demanded that there be not merely acceptance and understanding, but respect and love on both sides” (100). This idealization and its attendant assumptions lead Lomax to some remarkable generalizations. He seems to have trouble sympathizing completely with the Creoles, who he explains tended to have greater financial stability and higher social status than the blacks of New Orleans; despite their great pride in their musical ability (and technical training), Lomax implies that Creole musicians have less pure motives for their involvement in music than black musicians. He suggests, for example, that “music for the blacks was not primarily an avenue of self-advancement, as with the Creoles, but, first of all, sheer, unadulterated joy” (102), and that blacks brought a unique “toughness” to jazz—

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<sup>7</sup> Morton’s “take” on the music, significantly, was clearly opposed to Lomax’s. Morton saw jazz as a sophisticated art form, containing “the finest ideas from the greatest operas, symphonies, and overtures.... There’s nothing finer than jazz music, because it comes from everything of the finest class music” (Transcript 36). In his notorious letter to *Down Beat*, (if Morton was indeed the author,) he derided W.C. Handy’s jazz “ability,” calling him a purveyor of “Folk Songs, Hymns, Anthems, etc.” (Szwed 65). Lomax does not include this portion of the letter in his book.

having “had no music lessons, no family name, and no stable community life to support them” (100-1). Blacks have suffered more, and bring more honest feeling to their music, whereas Creoles are merely ambitious (and perhaps too technically trained to be genuine). Whatever Morton’s own thoughts on his career, Lomax insists that “jazz for him was power, a way out of a narrow valley of Jim Crow and Creole prejudice” (*MJR* 109), “a possible avenue of escape from a confining Negro status” (105).

One of the most egregious examples of Lomax’s projection onto Morton involves his fostering of what Gushee calls “the obnoxious notion that Morton was something of a racist” (338). Morton’s identity as a Creole is everywhere central to Lomax’s analysis (even appearing in the title of the book). Lomax explains that New Orleans Creoles harbor more racial prejudice than even whites of the time, due to the precariousness of their intermediate social status, and that therefore, “Invariably, in describing someone, a Creole would begin, ‘He’s kind of light brown...’ or, ‘He’s real black, got bad (kinky) hair...’[...] A man’s pigmentation was his most significant human attribute in New Orleans” (80). This observation does play out in a number of Lomax’s interviews for the book—both Alphonse Picou and Albert Glenny, for example, respond to Lomax’s question, “What kind of a man was [Buddy] Bolden, anyway, personally?” with descriptions of his skin color (146, 149). Notably, however, this is not “invariably” the case with Morton; though he often mentions such details, he is equally likely to begin with a comment about a person’s attractiveness or style of dress. In the transcripts of their

conversations, it is Lomax who frequently presses Morton for clarification about the race of a person being discussed, as in the following exchange, again about Buddy

Bolden:

**Alan Lomax:** Where'd he come from?

**Jelly Roll Morton:** Uh, Buddy Bolden was a New Orleans  
boy — as far as I know.

**Alan Lomax:** A Negro?

**Jelly Roll Morton:** He was a Negro, yes. Right in New  
Orleans.

**Alan Lomax:** Dark or—?

**Jelly Roll Morton:** No, no, he was, uh, he was light  
complexioned. He was what you call a, a light brown-skin  
boy. (Transcript 54)

This discussion would seem to indicate neither a particular interest in Bolden's race as a defining characteristic, nor even much desire to distinguish among degrees of blackness—at least not on the part of Morton. This does not discourage Lomax, however, from implying that Morton shares his racial preoccupation. In his rendering of this dialogue for the book, he has Morton merely explaining, “[Bolden] was our favorite in the Garden District. He was a light brown-skin boy from Uptown” (*MJR* 60).

It is difficult to find compelling proof of racial discomfort or hostility in Morton's own discussion of his life. What incriminating “evidence” exists in

*Mister Jelly Roll* comes not from Morton himself, but from others' accounts in the book: from Mabel, Morton's second wife, from New Orleans musician Paul Dominguez, and from Lomax himself by implication. For his part, Morton praises individual musicians of all complexions and discusses various Black friends and employees with no sign of prejudice; he clearly enacted no racial discrimination in his hiring of musicians. Morton recalls with pride his partial ownership of black-and-tan nightclubs in both Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., when such establishments were rare—in fact, several of the Los Angeles episodes in the book involve the police harassment he incurred as a result. Resentment of whites in jazz music is another pet theme for Lomax,<sup>8</sup> but Morton does not seem to view jazz through racial essentialism; for example, Mabel quotes him as saying that “those white boys are not playing corny any more.[...] They're getting the *idea* of how to play hot” (*MJR* 217, emphasis in original). But racial tension is essential to Lomax's definition of jazz; he needs to find it in Morton to affirm his own hypothesis.

When Morton neglects to manifest a fixation on race through his oral narrative, Lomax is undaunted, simply diagnosing this as denial: he calls Morton “the kind of Negro who refused to recognize racial discrimination” (*MJR* 217), claiming, “never once did he mention this problem [of segregation], nor did he once

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<sup>8</sup> Lomax believed whites could never grasp or replicate the emotional content of black musics. He has asserted that “[m]ost [white musicians] simply imitate and improvise upon the charming tonal material they hear on records [of black artists], without realizing that what they are playing with is not just ‘music,’ not just notes, but heightened speech as well” (*LBB* 347). He saw the involvement of whites in black genres as either corrupting or simply parasitic, respectively.

refer to his Negro status” (103). But this, too, is simply untrue. Morton’s awareness of his racially-subordinate status is clear—consider his recollection of nearly being lynched in Biloxi for the town’s mistaken belief that he was sexually involved with his white employer (42), or his comments about his gig at the U.S. Grant Hotel, which he considered “a pretty nice set-up...until I heard their white band was paid double what my boys were getting. Then I pulled my band out of that joint with no notice!” (173). Similar anecdotes appear in the transcripts, but were left out of the final book.<sup>9</sup> Lomax concedes no connection between Morton’s race-consciousness and his fight against his publishers and ASCAP, despite one publisher’s remark that “Jelly Roll was not a good old-time Southern darkey like Joe Oliver” (184); Lomax instead attributes Morton’s behavior to his “fathomless, boundless, limitless, humorless, and altogether Cellinesque ego” (234). Tautologies aside, Lomax ignores the basic pragmatism (naïvely optimistic though it may be) of Morton’s approach to social and economic obstacles, preferring to consider him deeply guarded and conflicted, if not actually delusional. Morton is not in denial about racial injustice; what he refuses to accept is that nothing can be done about it.

In addition to fixating on his (relatively) privileged racial identity, Lomax has other subtle ways of undermining Morton’s credibility and authenticity. Morton’s so-called “Cellinesque ego” is another major theme of *Mr. Jelly Roll*;

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the transcript includes the following note from Morton’s dictation: “walked into Orange, Mississippi — a little bitty town — tried to buy food in a little store and they wouldn’t sell to colored” (Transcript 190).



much is made in the book of Morton's reputation as a braggart, and Lomax has nearly all of his interview subjects contribute reminiscences on this score. From Morton's wives and former colleagues, we get several accounts of his self-praise: as one of Jelly's "old Chicago friends"<sup>10</sup> put it, "of all his mother's children, he loved Jelly Roll the best" (*MJR* 189). But despite Lomax's emphasis of this, (and unlike Benvenuto Cellini,) Morton does not devote his portion of the story to exaggeration or self-aggrandizement; whatever his history as a "braggadocio," he seems reluctant to record this side of his character for posterity. Though Lomax remarks that "it suited Jelly Roll to feel that he walked alone" (69), Morton actually spends a great deal of time acknowledging the talent and contributions of other musicians—even rival ones. His admiration for Tony Jackson, whom he deems "the greatest single-handed entertainer in the world" (43), is a motif in the book: he admits that Tony "was the outstanding favorite of New Orleans" (43), and recalls that "when Tony came in, the guys would tell me, 'Get off that piano stool. You're hurting the piano's feelings'" (129). Morton claims he defeated Jackson in a competition once, but explains, "I never thought the prize was given to the right party; I thought Tony should have the emblem" (45). And Jackson is not the only pianist praised by Morton in the course of the interviews; Sammy Davis gets called "one of the

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<sup>10</sup> It is clear from the transcripts that this comment, like most others attributed mysteriously in *Mr. Jelly Roll* to "old friends" of Morton's or to "New Orleans" collectively, was in fact made by guitarist Johnny St. Cyr. Considering the abundance of other thoughtful and candid contributions by St. Cyr to the book, it seems likely that Lomax chose to include these remarks anonymously merely to prevent the appearance of too-great reliance on a single source. See Transcript pages 140, 169.

greatest manipulators of the keyboard...in the history of the world” (43) and Albert Cahill [Carroll] “the greatest show player that ever was in existence” (43). At numerous other points in the book, Morton takes time out from his narrative to mention some of the skilled musicians he had known or employed.

Like the evidence of his alleged racist inclinations, Morton’s wildest boasts only appear second- or third-hand, in the accounts of others. The stories he tells of his life and career are, undoubtedly, sometimes embellished, but one is reminded above all of Twain<sup>11</sup>—the picaresque capers of the narrative feature Morton as a chiefly comic hero and, if anything, actually minimize his career and his obsessive passion for music. The most infamous example of Morton’s supposed arrogance is the letter, printed in *Down Beat* magazine and reproduced in *Mister Jelly Roll*, in which he responds to W.C. Handy’s appearance on Ripley’s *Believe It or Not* (for which Handy was introduced as “originator of *jazz, stomps, and blues*”) by ridiculing Handy and claiming (most of) that credit for himself (*MJR* 236). But suspicion has since been raised about the authorship of this famously haughty letter. In their book *Jelly’s Blues*, Harold Reich and William Gaines report that it was Morton’s new friend Roy Carew who composed the letter, which Morton merely signed (*JB* 152).

What apparent self-congratulation remains in *Mister Jelly Roll* is mostly validated by Morton’s friends and colleagues, who almost invariably stress, as

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<sup>11</sup> Others have drawn comparisons between Morton’s narrative and Twain; John Szwed refers to the Library of Congress interview as “a sociological treatise and a historical document, spoken with all the authenticity and color of a Mark Twain” (Szwed 18).

clarinetist Omer Simeon does, that Morton “could back up everything he *said* by what he could *do*” (qtd. in *MJR* 220, emphasis in original). Morton was, after all, a famous, successful, and innovative musician and composer; one can hardly expect him to entirely avoid the subject of his successes. Jazz expert William Russell expressed disapproval of *Mister Jelly Roll*'s depiction of Morton as a braggart. In his notes to Lomax about the book, Russell objects that it:

would probably lend many people to believe that he was a real hypocrite and a big liar, thus adding to what a very few people (mostly jealous 4<sup>th</sup> rate musicians) said about him. Whereas just about everyone, especially those who knew him best always stress that no matter what Jelly said he could make good his claims etc. I believe it is OK to tell the facts and report things as they are, but I don't think that Jelly's friends and biographers etc. should lend encouragement to the idea that he was a big liar. (Transcript 233)

Lomax apparently did little to correct this impression of Morton in the book, however, despite Szwed's claim that “part of Lomax's effort [is] to present Morton's boasting and self-aggrandizement in a sympathetic light” (Szwed 32). On the contrary, several of Morton's versions of events have actually been edited by Lomax to appear *more* boastful than they are in the interviews. Morton's much-discussed claim, for instance, that he was scat-singing before Louis Armstrong is given a notably different cast in Lomax's book. In the transcripts of Morton's interviews, he is recorded as presenting the following statement:

...scats is something that a lot of people don't understand and they—and they begin to believe that the first scat numbers was ever done was done by one of my hometown boys, Louis Armstrong. But I must take the credit away, since I know better. The first man that ever did a scat number in history of this country was a man from Vicksburg, Mississippi, by the name of Joe Sims, an old comedian. And from that, Tony Jackson and myself and several more grabbed it in New Orleans. And found it was pretty good for an introduction of a song. (Transcript 51)

In the book, however, the story is presented this way:

People believe Louis Armstrong originated scat. I must take that credit away from him, because I know better. Tony Jackson and myself were using scat for novelty back in 1906 and 1907 when Louis Armstrong was still in the orphan's home. (*MJR* 129)

What began as an attempt to merely establish an earlier date is transformed into a pompous claim of self-origination.

Morton's supposed "paranoid" obsessions are similarly magnified by Lomax, but entirely absent from Morton's own discourse. Lomax describes what he saw as Morton's "feelings of neurotic persecution," saying:

MCA had the best jobs sewed up and they wouldn't have him. ASCAP wouldn't give him a full membership. The goons who then ran the union had threatened to kill him.... All this Jelly Roll used to

pour out in an angry diatribe, followed by even wilder plans for revenge.... The big corporations had taken over jazz and ruined Jelly Roll, that was his theme, and he would speak on it for hours. (220-1)

Amazingly, though, if Morton talked on these themes for “hours,” nary a hint of them appear in his portions of either the book or the transcripts. There is no doubt that his mistreatment by the music industry was a sore subject for Morton, but this is clearly not something he wished to immortalize in the interviews. Furthermore, as later legal battles with ASCAP would show, Morton was neither “neurotic” nor “paranoid” in his suspicion of unfair practices: not until the late 1930s did ASCAP begin admitting black musicians, and a tiered membership system (which determined royalty payment) remained in place until 1960.<sup>12</sup>

At other times, Lomax cites perceived departures from his romantic folk ideal as evidence qualifying Morton’s sincerity as a musician, revealing a lingering ambivalence toward both Morton and jazz music generally. When Morton fails to exhibit the requisite racism, Lomax identifies this as a fault, suddenly even questioning Morton’s greatness as a musician:

In one important respect, however, Morton fell short of his fellows—he was not moaning the blues, the lost and homeless, the freezing-ground-was-my-folding-bed-last-night-blues—he was not protesting against the way things were run, because within himself he accepted Jim Crow, economic inequality, frustration and his own eternal

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<sup>12</sup> For more detailed discussion of these events, see Reich and Gaines, 239-41.

insecurity as part of the natural order of things. In this one respect he does not belong in the company of great hot jazzmen. He did not feel the blues, because he always refused to admit he was a Negro and that he was lonely. (*MJR* 196)

Despite earlier melodramatic descriptions of Morton's painful and troubled childhood, he now comes up short in his experience of suffering—a characterization meant to call Morton's entire authenticity into question. Elsewhere, Lomax discusses Morton's Red Hot Peppers period:

There may be more deeply emotional and moving jazz records than *Black Bottom Stomp*, *Doctor Jazz*, *Sidewalk Blues*, *Granpa's Spells*, [...] but not more subtly designed and brilliantly executed, none with such a rich rhythmic and harmonic texture, none touched with such true fire[.... ] From the very first session these discs exhibit a harmonic finesse and a rhythmic variety which outshines those of other leaders. (*MJR* 193)

That these remarks contain a criticism should not be mistaken: for Lomax, it is pathos, not “finesse,” which constitutes authenticity; a shortage of emotion is a musician's worst sin in Lomax's estimation.

But this criticism is probably not strictly as personal as it may at first seem; in *The Land Where the Blues Began*, Lomax argues that although it was the influence of the blues (“the blue feeling”) that “attracted a very blue and lonely twentieth century to jazz” (*LBB* 440),

Almost before it had begun to grow, jazz was made respectable, brought under control, and made to serve the purposes of the amusement industry rather than to express the anger, the anxiety, and the aspirations of the blacks who had created it.

However, the blues of the professional jazzman are never quite the real thing.[...] A glance at the lyrics of the so-called blues composed by jazzmen shows one immediately that these musicians never had the blues in the sense that Big Bill [Broonzy, blues musician,] and his friends knew them. (439-40)

In Lomax's analysis of jazz, as in his references to Morton, a lack of emotional suffering comes to explain both the effects and, ex post facto, the cause of jazz music's corruption: commercial success causes the musicians to lose touch with their roots in hardship (and their music, consequently, to lose its power); once this "fact" has been established, however, it is asserted that these musicians *never* suffered the way the true "folk" do (which now accounts for their music's lack of power).

Since Lomax is still conflicted about the authenticity of Morton and jazz generally, such rationalization is unfortunately not altogether rare in *Mr. Jelly Roll*. More often, though, Lomax is content to revise Morton's story—not to say his identity—so that it fits his romantic ideal, dramatizing and exorcising "the painful burden of [Morton's] secrets, the sorrow of his lies and his pretensions" (*MJR* 37), creating or implying them when they fail to self-reveal. Despite his remaining

reservations, his admiration for Morton's music is still unmistakable. But taken for its specifics, the book reveals as much about Lomax as about Morton's life, for more than anything, this is Lomax's project—Lomax, the voice of the folk and the savior of the history of Jazz. It was Lomax, according to himself, who “decided to find out how much of old New Orleans lived in [Morton's] mind” (xviii), and because of his efforts that “New Orleans and her boy, Jelly, were getting their hearing at the bar of history itself” (241).<sup>13</sup> The effect is a representation of Morton not as he hoped himself to be remembered, but as Lomax desired him to appear. If, later, he was afraid things had gone a bit too far and felt compelled to defend Jelly in his Preface against implications of braggery and racism from the “author” of *Jelly's Last Jam* (one can't imagine where someone might have gotten such an impression), he manages to reassure himself with his belief that he created a new form of historical scholarship, and “since that day Jelly's diamond has glittered in every book and article on hot music” (242). In truth, Lomax almost certainly played a crucial role in establishing Morton's legacy, but the figure he established is one, in no small part, of his own design.

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<sup>13</sup> Despite his invocation of history here, Lomax declares in his Preface to the 1993 reprint of *Mister Jelly Roll* that “What [Morton, like other artists he had interviewed,] had to offer was *not literal history*, as so many oral historians have mistakenly thought, but the fruit of their lifelong experience, the evocation of their periods, and their imagination and style—the things that every good writer brings us” (*MJR* xiv, emphasis added). Unfortunately, most readers do not interpret the book as a work of imaginative literature. Nearly everything written about Morton since has relied on *Mister Jelly Roll* as an important source; even those authors who have been critical of Lomax tend to draw biographical details about Morton from Lomax's text.



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