

Brief History of Detroit's Music Scene

I. What Started It All!?!?

- A. Jerome Remick, bought a small struggling publishing company in 1898 and turned it into Jerome Remick & Co, a publishing house for sheet music. By 1905, Remick and his business partners found success in selling several million copies of "In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree", "Pretty Baby" and more. *George Gershwin*, a composer, joined Remick in 1914 and went on to create many big hits of the 1910's. Remick eventually sold the extremely successful company to the Warner Brothers conglomerate in 1928. Remick's legacy helped create Detroit's Orchestra Hall in 1919 and helped increase the DSO from 50 to 90 players.
- B. Convention Town - In the 1870s men began founding and joining new clubs by the thousands from all levels of society. Immigrants organized clubs, as did African-Americans. Women would not be left out either and created auxiliaries of men's clubs or founded major new sisterhoods. From 1870 to the end of the 1920s Americans' social life centered on these clubs.
 - i. The great event that every loyal member eagerly prepared for was the ***national convention***. A branch of the Freemasonry, the Knights Templar, held Detroit's first national convention in 1870 and made a deep impression on Detroiters that the city could be promoted for this type of event. Knights and their companions arrived by several thousands. Convention's meant a party, with ***music*** and beverage, and with that Detroit became a hotspot!



Courtesy of the Burton Historical Collection

II. 1917-1922: Society Bands

- A. The dance craze that started around World War I was to the tune of so-called society band music. Society bands had a repertoire of ragtime, light classics, and popular songs within an arranged format that allowed little or no improvisation. Both white and black jazzmen got their early training in big band playing in these society bands.
- B. **The Great Migration & Music** -
Up to 1922, the society band tradition dominated both black and white dance bands. However, there is some scant information that more jazz-oriented Black bands also played in the city at this time. Given the considerable amount of scholarly attention given to the migration of New Orleans musicians northward, it seems probable that few, if any, of these musicians came to Detroit to play for long periods of time. Again, not an unexpected occurrence; only a small percentage of Black migrants to Detroit came from Louisiana. One of the few documented jazz bands in Detroit during this period came from a more common source of migrants - Kentucky.

III. 1923-1929: Big Band Jazz

- A. At no other time before 1950 did Detroit bands play as central a role in the stylistic development of jazz as they did during the period 1923- 1929.
- B. The **Jean Goldkette Victor Recording Orchestra** and the **McKinney's Cotton Pickers** both played well-documented roles in the early development of big band jazz.
 - i. The McKinney Cotton Pickers was one of the pioneers of big band jazz in the 1920s along with a handful of other African American bands in the country.
 - a. The McKinney band is the best documented of Detroit bands, but there are others that escaped attention because they did not have the Cotton Pickers' good fortune to record before the 1940s. At least three other African American big bands had frequent engagements in Detroit's ballrooms.
 - ii. Jean Goldkette Victor Recording Orchestra represented the more avant-garde among white musicians by combining society music with "hot" solos of the day.

- a. It was not until the middle of the 1930's that white big bands had fully assimilated the stylistic innovations of the African American musical pioneers.



McKinney's Cotton Pickers

Courtesy of Detroit Historical Society Collection



Jean Goldkette's Orchestra

- C. Goldkette, like several contemporary bandleaders (white or black), was also a band booker. During its heyday in the latter half of the 1920s his booking organization managed around twenty different bands. In the fall of 1926 Goldkette brought the McKinney band to Detroit, first to the Arcadia, and by early 1927 to his own Graystone Ballroom. The band became the first African-American band to play at the Graystone, although not before it agreed, under management pressure, to change its name to McKinney's "Cotton Pickers". Its immediate commercial success at the Graystone, as well as its RCA Victor recordings (1928- 1931), kept the Goldkette organization busy booking engagements until about 1931.

IV. The 1930's: Paradise Valley Days

- A. During the 1930s the most important change in the African American jazz community was the gradual shift from big ballrooms to small cabaret bands. This change in size and source of employment reflected the growth of the black-and-tan cabaret and the emergence of Paradise Valley as the major entertainment spot in Detroit. The Valley was located within the Black community on the city's near East Side around the intersection of St. Antoine and Adams. Entertainment spots included, but were not limited to:
 - i. The Plantation, later Club Plantation, at 550 East Adams was the most prominent of the black-and-tans during the 1930s. Andrew "Jap" Sneed managed the club, and his partner, Stutz Anderson provided the music at the opening in the fall of 1933.

- ii. Another Black-owned black-and-tan cabaret was the Chocolate Bar, which for many years had a house band led by guitarist George Dawson.
- iii. Club Harlem was one of the few white owned black-and-tan cabarets. The owner was Morris Wasserman, who later owned The Flame which in the 1950s became one of the city's major jazz clubs. Bands led by Ernest Cooper, Monk Culp and Milt Buckner played at Club Harlem.



Performers at Club Harlem circa 1935 - Courtesy of Henry Ford Collection

- B. Paradise Valley was also the place where musicians found after-hours spots for jam sessions and socializing. All the after-hours spots catered to integrated audiences. Jess Faithful's Rhythm Club and the B&C Club owned by Roy Lightfoot were the two most prominent spots during the decade.
 - i. During the '30s, a musicians' subculture, including some white players, developed around the jam sessions held at the after-hours spots in Paradise Valley. This provided one of the institutional foundations for the later development of a new jazz style: bebop.
- V. The 1940's: Creating Bombs & Beats**
- A. In the years after World War II, popular music tastes changed nationally and in Detroit as well. While some fans picked up on the modern jazz trend, the general public went in a different direction. Mainstream audiences moved away from sophisticated big band swing music and began to prefer individual singers, usually of a smooth pop-jazz style.
 - i. However, whites with a southern background continued to listen to the raw sound of country music, while black audiences gravitated toward the grittier, more urban rhythm 'n' blues.

- B. The Detroit blues scene found a resurgence during the 1940's, with the second wave of the Great Migration, bringing artists such as John Lee Hooker to Detroit to work in factories of the Arsenal of Democracy.
 - i. It was the emergence of local record labels in Detroit in the 1940s and 50s which helped the blues scene to flourish, compared to the 1920s, when blues artists generally emigrated to Chicago to record their music. Some small labels, including Staff, Holiday, Modern, and Prize Records, only existed for a brief time, while other labels experienced greater success. The most prominent of the Detroit-based labels from this era was Fortune Records, and its subsidiary labels Hi-Q, Strate 8 and Blue Star, which ran from 1948 to 1970.
- C. Detroit has produced some of the most famous gospel singers in past decades. In the 1940s, Oliver Green formed The Detroiters, who became one of the most popular Gospel groups of their era.

VI. The 1950's: Big Cars and Bolder Music

- A. By the early 1950's, R&B, country, and pop all began to merge into a new style with a driving beat and a simple chord structure – a style that came to be called rock 'n' roll. By about 1956, with the rise of Elvis Presley, teenagers had embraced the new music and made it the focus of a snowballing American youth culture with themes of rebellion and alienation at its core.
- B. The entertainment districts of Hastings Street and Paradise Valley were razed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the victims of urban renewal programs. This loss of music venues, along with the rise of Motown in Detroit and the popularity of rock and roll, led to the eventual demise of the Detroit blues scene in the late 1960s.
- C. In the 1950s, Laura Lee and a young Della Reese began their long and distinguished careers coming out of the Meditations Singers, indisputably the premier Detroit-based, female gospel group of that era. Theirs was the first Motor City act to introduce instrumental backing to traditional acappella vocals. Della joined the ranks of the gospel elite in Detroit, while Mattie Moss Clark is believed to be the first to introduce a three-part harmony into gospel choral music.
- D. Detroit has a long and rich history associated with rock and roll. In 1954 Hank Ballard & the Midnighters crossed over from the R&B charts to the pop charts with "Work with Me, Annie". The song nearly broke into the elite top 20 despite being barred from airplay on many stations due to its suggestive lyrics. In 1955, Detroit-native Bill Haley ushered in the rock and roll era with the release of "Rock Around the Clock".

VII. The 1960's: Rise of Motown

- A. Detroit's brand of Soul emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s from Gospel and R&B performers such as Aretha Franklin, known as the "Queen of Soul" and generally regarded as one of the greatest vocalists of all time.
- B. Another highlight of Detroit's musical history was the success of Motown Records during the 1960s and early 1970s. The label was founded in the late 1950s by auto plant worker Berry Gordy Jr, and was originally known as Tamla Records. As Motown, it became home to some of the most popular recording acts in the world, including Marvin Gaye, The Temptations, Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross & The Supremes, Smokey Robinson & The Miracles, The Four Tops, Martha Reeves & the Vandellas, Edwin Starr, Little Willie John, The Contours and The Spinners.
 - i. **Civil Rights & Rebellion:** Concerned that mainstream America would reject African American popular music, Berry Gordy, Jr. released his early Motown Record albums without including photographs of the bands and performers. Nonetheless, acts like The Supremes and The Temptations proved to have crossover appeal, catapulting African American musicians into homes across the nation on *American Bandstand* and the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Although Motown's development corresponded with the growing civil rights movement, the label was never a formal participant. Instead, Motown's artists helped break down social barriers in American popular culture during the 1960s and 1970s.
 - a. *Respect* – Originally recorded in 1965 as a ballad by artist Otis Redding, "Respect" became Aretha Franklin's signature song after her powerhouse recording two years later. Franklin's version, which added the famous R-E-S-P-E-C-T spelling in the chorus, became a landmark song of the feminism movement in America. The song would earn Franklin two Grammy's and is number five on *Rolling Stone* magazine's list of the top songs of all time.
 - b. *Dancing in the Street* - Originally conceived as a danceable party song, "Dancing in the Street" by Martha and the Vandellas became known as an anthem of civil unrest when inner-city riots broke out in Detroit and other American cities during the mid-to late 1960s. Rioters cited the song as a 'call to action', inviting them to take to the streets in protest. The song peaked at number two on the Billboard pop chart and in 2006 was preserved by the Library of Congress in the National Recording Registry.
- C. In 1965 Mitch Ryder & the Detroit Wheels had a national top 10 hit with "Jenny Take A Ride!" and then again the following year in 1966 with "Devil With A Blue Dress On"/"Good Golly, Miss Molly". Finally, in 1967, Detroit blues-rock outfit the Woolies had a regional smash hit with the Bo Diddley song "Who Do You Love?"

- i. In the late 1960s, well-known high-energy rock bands emerged from Detroit - the MC5 and Iggy and the Stooges. These bands laid the groundwork for the future punk and hard rock movements in the late 1970s.

VIII. The 1970's:

A. During the 1960s and 1970s, Detroit rockers Mitch Ryder and Bob Seger, both known for their deep and soulful vocal styles, helped establish metro Detroit as the home for rock innovation. With enthusiastic crowds filling the venues throughout the region, Detroit became a key stop on nearly every national rock and roll tour and helped inspire a generation of Detroit rockers.

- i. **Civil Rights & Rebellion (cont'd):**

- a. "What's Going On" – inspired by the civil unrest surrounding the Vietnam War and the police brutality directed at anti-war protestors, Motown songwriter Al Cleveland and Four Tops singer Renaldo "Obie" Benson penned a moody, soulful song to capture the confusion and tension of the early 1970s. Cleveland and Benson presented the song to artist Marvin Gaye, who added his own masterful touches to the composition and recorded the song at the Hitsville USA studios at Motown Records headquarters. Despite Berry Gordy, Jr's initial dislike of the song, "What's Going On" and the album of the same name went on to become a critical and commercial success.

- b. "War" – Written for and originally recorded by the Temptations, the anti-Vietnam protest song was deemed too controversial for one of Motown's signature acts, so little-known Motown singer Edwin Starr volunteered to re-record the song. Starr's version reached number one on the Billboard pop chart in August 1970 and is regarded as one of the most important protest songs of all time. The soulful and intense lyrics combined with heavily syncopated rhythm to produce a song that became an anthem of the anti-war movement during the early 1970s.

IX. 1980's & 90's: From Synthesizers to Slim Shady

A. **Techno** - In the early 1980s, three high school friends in the Detroit suburb of Belleville experimented by mixing disco, dance, and house music. Juan Atkins, Derrick May, and Kevin Saunderson, or the "Holy Trinity" as they became known, along with Eddie Fowlkes, are considered the founders of Techno, the altogether new sound that emerged from this musical fusion. Techno began taking hold in the Detroit and Chicago club scenes in the late 1980s and exploded into a worldwide phenomenon when European DJs discovered the unique combination of driving beats and digital effects. Techno is alive and well in Detroit today and

is celebrated each year during *Movement* held at Hart Plaza each Memorial Day Weekend.

- B. **Rap** – When the film *8 Mile* debuted in 2002, it depicted Detroit as a breeding ground for new musicians and *lyrical styles born out of the frustrations of a city in decline*. Filmed in Detroit and starring Marshal “Eminem” Mathers in the lead role, the soundtrack debuted at number one on Billboard’s pop chart and Mathers won an Academy Award for Best Original Song for the hit “Lose Yourself”

X. **Places to “Be Seen”**

- A. Graystone Ballroom – Located on Woodward Avenue near Canfield, the Graystone Ballroom was one of the most renowned dance halls in the nation during the 1920s and 1930s. it served as the home base for McKinney’s Cotton Pickers and welcomed national jazz acts such as Cab Calloway and count Basie to its stage. The building was demolished in 1980, after decades of neglect.
- B. The Roostertail – Named for the spray created by the wake of a fast-moving boat, The Roostertail has been one of Detroit’s premier waterfront destinations since 1958. The venue was a favorite stop for many of Detroit’s twentieth century musical icons, from Motown great Stevie Wonder and Diana Ross to the Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin.
- C. Flame Show Bar – Located at the corner of John R and Canfield, the Flame Show Bar was one of the leading entertainment spots in Detroit’s and a showcase for African American musicians during the 1950’s. The club’s bandleader, Maurice King regularly welcomed headliners like Billie Holiday, Della Reese, Sam Cooke and Dinah Washington.
- D. DTE Energy Music Theatre – Opening as the Pine Knob Music theatre in 1972, this outdoor Amphitheatre located in Clarkston MI seats more than 15,000 people and is considered to be one of the country’s top outdoor music venues. Each summer it hosts concerts my local favorites, including Kid Rock, and national acts ranging from Jimmy Buffet to Aerosmith.

XI. **Bibliography**

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