

The Washington Post
Monday, August 5, 2002
Style, Arts, Performing Arts
(Featured, boxed article)

Original Dixieland, Growing From Its Roots

With plenty of New Orleans strut and brass, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band swiftly turned back the clock to the dawn of the recorded jazz age during its performance Saturday night at the Kennedy Center's millennium Stage.

Under the direction of trumpeter Jimmy LaRocca, son of the band's founding leader, James "Nick" LaRocca, the current ensemble performed both the A- and the B-sides of the groundbreaking disc their predecessors made in 1917. The latter, the million-selling "Livery Stable Blues," with its whinnying trumpet lines, was wonderfully evocative of the era, as were "Tiger Rag" and other ODJB staples.

Not that the band displayed much interest in playing note-for-note transcriptions of the original arrangements. "St. Louis Blues," which suddenly veered off into swing territory, was perhaps the most obvious example of the liberties taken throughout the concert. But no matter. The front line featuring LaRocca, clarinetist Tim Laughlin and trombonist Steve Suter is so well versed in traditional jazz polyphony that the band's fundamental inspiration was always evident. Besides, the rhythm section-pianist Tom Roberts, bassist Al Bernard and drummer David Hansen-spent a lot of time underscoring familiar themes, sinuous countermelodies and brassy interjections with infectiously syncopated beats and Crescent City martial cadences. Laughlin, a veteran of several New Orleans ensembles, often projected a sumptuous and woody tone, in sharp relief to the sound of LaRocca's fiery trumpet and Suter's growling trombone.

For the encore, LaRocca, whose vocals are inspired by Louis Armstrong, offered the crowd a little lagniappe-a "ragged but right" version of "St. James Infirmary."

-Mike Joyce

Photo with text: The Original Dixieland Jazz Band played versions of the earliest jazz recordings on Saturday.