

“Sugar Foot Stomp”—Fletcher Henderson (1925)

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Essay by Jeffrey Magee (guest post)*



Fletcher Henderson

A keystone in the 1930s big-band swing repertoire and beyond, “Sugar Foot Stomp” boasted popular recordings by Benny Goodman, Chick Webb, Artie Shaw, and Glenn Miller, among others, but it had been a best-selling record as early as 1925 for the ensemble known as Fletcher Henderson and His Orchestra. In the words of Henderson’s chief arranger and multi-reed player Don Redman, it was “the record that made Fletcher Henderson nationally known,” and Henderson himself referred to it as his favorite among the hundreds of recordings he had made as a bandleader.

The piece had come to Henderson’s attention through the trumpet player he had hired a year earlier: Louis Armstrong. Just 23 years-old, Armstrong had come to New York after playing in the influential Chicago-based band of his New Orleans mentor, cornetist Joseph “King” Oliver. As Redman recalled, Armstrong “showed me a little book of manuscripts, some melodies that he and the famous King Oliver had written in Chicago.... He asked me, ‘Just pick out one you may like and make an arrangement for Fletcher’s orchestra.’ So I did and the one I picked was ‘Sugar Foot Stomp.’”

The piece’s original title had been “Dipper Mouth Blues,” a 12-bar blues tune dubbed with Armstrong’s nickname. The Oliver band’s recorded performances (1923) exemplified the flexible, loose-limbed small-combo collective improvisation that marked the New Orleans style of early jazz, and it became influential and much imitated in its own right. Early in the recording, clarinetist Johnny Dodds emerges into the musical foreground with a fluent solo punctuated by three-beat chords by the other band members. Later, Oliver blows a plaintive, muted bluesy solo that would stand among the most copied passages in the 1920s jazz repertoire. Armstrong, the “Dipper Mouth” of the title, remains in the background throughout, weaving counterpoint and shadowing harmony. Solos aside, in New Orleans jazz, the group trumps the individual, and the fluent polyphony of collective improvisation remains the style’s gold standard.

Redman's new title signaled a rebranding. In the parlance of 1920s America, blues and stomps stood on opposite ends of the song-publishing business: the latter connoted a louder, faster, more raucous dance music. Henderson's band recorded "Sugar Foot Stomp" at a marginally faster tempo than Oliver did under the original title, but there is no mistaking the relationship between the two. At every turn, however, Redman's arrangement harks back to the original only to swerve into surprising new territory, willfully and playfully signifying on "Dipper Mouth Blues." The changes reflect new approaches to dance-band arranging that emerged in the early 1920s.

The introduction launches like Oliver's then quickly shifts into unexpected chords that descend deceptively into the first section of the piece. The freewheeling spirit of collective improvisation yields to more hierarchical textures where a melody instrument takes the lead, or a tightly arranged, written-down, passage for a small group within the ensemble comes to the fore. That happens in the third section of the piece, where a trio of clarinets replaces the clarinet solo of the original. The clarinet trio would become a Redman trademark, would recur in many 1920s jazz recordings made in New York, and held a unique place in the period's musical landscape. In the middle of the piece, a jewel in the crown, Armstrong assumes the mantle of his mentor and blasts Oliver's famous muted cornet solo through his unmuted trumpet, effecting both an homage and a transformation. The piece ends in another characteristic Don Redman move as it toggles between sections simulating New Orleans collective improvisation and sections conjuring a smoother, more symphonic sound more attuned to New York tastes.

"Sugar Foot Stomp" holds a significant place in the telling of jazz history. That it derives from a piece composed by Oliver and Armstrong inspired a narrative of succession from small-combo improvisation to big band arrangements, from New Orleans to New York. The composer Gunther Schuller, a pioneering jazz historian and critic, would have none of it. "The whole association with Oliver's 'Dipper Mouth Blues,' the fact that Armstrong is supposed to have brought the music with him from Chicago, is the kind of 'legendary' material jazz writers have frequently pounced upon in lieu of criteria based on musical analysis," he wrote in his classic book, "Early Jazz," in 1968. Cutting through the crust of legend, Schuller went back to the source and pronounced Henderson's recording to be of "very mixed quality." Schuller holds that "Redman is responsible for the negative elements.... The shrill and badly played clarinet-trio choruses and the later sustained 'symphonic' sections are out of place next to the solos or semi-improvised passages." Those sections certainly stand out to any listener who knows Oliver's original "Dipper Mouth Blues," where ensemble polyphony is the textural norm.

Perhaps we can hear the "problem" passages differently, however, with ears more finely attuned to Redman's tendencies in the early 1920s. Indeed, in light of the willful variety or his earlier arrangements of 1923-24, the anomaly of the clarinet trio and the quasi-symphonic sections seem precisely to the point: the more contrast they provided, the better they fulfilled Redman's aims, which resonated with an emergent New York style that prized surprising juxtaposition. The "mixed quality" of the arrangement is more aptly heard as deliberately mixed styles. That the clarinet trio may be "badly played" also points to its historical moment: Henderson's early recordings—made during a period when records were made with little view toward posterity—reveal many instances where the musicians could not play, or did not have time to perfect, the material Redman gave them to play. Even the short tag ending is tricky: it ends on a cliffhanger

of a chord, unresolved. To the very last note, then, “Sugar Foot Stomp” transforms the stylistically consistent “Dipper Mouth Blues” into a colorful prism of New York jazz.

“Sugar Foot Stomp” was recorded often and published in a stock arrangement derivative of Redman’s without crediting him. It became a mainstay of the jazz repertory, and the Henderson band’s version became the model on which other bands based their versions into the 1940s. Even King Oliver, with a ten-piece band, recorded the piece under the new title. In the 1930s, Henderson’s band would revisit ‘Sugar Foot Stomp’ many times, now at breakneck tempos, allowing for more improvised solos while preserving the substance of the popular 1925 version. It became what was known in the era as a killer-diller: difficult, fast, exciting. In that spirit, it became a nationwide hit for many other bands in the later 1930s. By then, Henderson himself had become a leading arranger writing for Benny Goodman, who, with “Sugar Foot Stomp” and other Henderson classics, would win the moniker “King of Swing.”

Jeffrey Magee is the author of “The Uncrowned King of Swing: Fletcher Henderson and Big Band Jazz,” from which the above is excerpted, and “Irving Berlin’s American Musical Theater.”

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.