The Maturation of Pulse: The Rhythmic Evolution from Swing to Bebop

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THE MATURATION OF PULSE: THE RHYTHMIC EVOLUTION
FROM SWING TO BEBOP

by

Sam Weber

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
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Sam Weber
The musical style that came to prominence in US in the 1940s, known as bebop, is a style that is remembered and discussed in terms of its harmonic characteristics and its notable soloists. This is the view that is taken in most scholarly writing on the music and also the view that is taught to most students of jazz today. However, there is arguably an equally if not more profound evolution in the rhythmic language of this music which is almost totally un-discussed. By digitally analyzing recordings, tracing musical and personal influence, and by examining related technological developments, it becomes clear that there are unrecognized progenitors of the bebop style and un-cited factors in its inception. In particular, Oklahoma City bassist Walter Page is largely responsible for the development of an updated model of musical pulse, which paved the way for the musical developments that would follow. This paper discusses the unidentified musicians and un-cited rhythmic devices vital to the bebop revolution, in order to present a more complete picture of the birth of this music.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In music, there are few elements as powerful and moving as pulse. This musical phenomenon, which some scholars feel is deeply connected to human physiology, is particularly intricate, baffling, and vitally central in the American music referred to as jazz. Between the mid 1930s and the early 1940s, this pulse evolved in conjunction with the birth of bebop, a new music whose conception is almost universally credited to alto saxophonist Charlie Parker. As such, the musical overhaul that occurred in this period is generally discussed mostly in terms of the new style of virtuosic soloing and contemporary harmonic ideas that became the standard once bebop took root in American culture. In light of this somewhat slanted view, this paper will focus on the relatively un-cited rhythmic aspects of this musical evolution, in particular the change in the quality of pulse.

There are several issues that make this transition complicated to study. Firstly, little to none of the music in the most formative pre-bebop years was recorded. American Federation of Musicians president James C. Petrillo, who was concerned about live musicians being displaced by recorded music and not compensated, imposed a ban on recording from 1942 to 1944.\(^1\) The entire recording

industry was at a virtual standstill for this period. Musicians were beginning to experiment with bebop concepts before this, but these were the years that the new style was coming to fruition, and there is no record of it.

Secondly, there is a massive amount written about jazz and about this period, but much of it is far from helpful. This is partially because of the nature of this music’s role in American culture at the time of its early development. Initially, jazz was something one found in sordid dance halls, bars, and other establishments that did not necessarily promote the best in moral standards. It was not given the kind of attention that merited careful documentation until years later and consequently, much historical and analytical writing on jazz is posthumous and often inaccurate. For example, scholars were not even in agreement on the year that Charlie Parker was born until somewhat recently. Scholar, musician, and composer Gunther Schuller has noted, “The majority of books have concentrated on the legendry of jazz, and over the years a body of writing has accumulated which is little more than an amalgam of well-meaning amateur criticism and fascinated opinion.”

Besides the simple fact that this heap of enthusiastic and often uninformed scholarship is difficult to sift through, it has led to much conflation of terms, confusion of events, and conflict of sources even in discussion of basic information.

Thirdly, what accurate and insightful scholarly writings and studies do exist focus largely on harmony or the achievements of various soloists, and exhibit a general disregard for rhythm. For example, Charlie Parker himself alluded to the

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21 Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), vii. Schuller, a well-established musician himself, spent years listening to over 30,000 recordings from the earliest years of jazz up through the period in question before writing his two volumes on the early history of jazz. His writing in particular has been invaluable to this project.
drastic change of the pulse in bebop, saying: "The beat in a bop band is with the music, against it, behind it. . . It pushes it. It helps it. Help is the big thing. It has no continuity of beat, no steady chug chug. Jazz has, and that's why bop is more flexible." Yet in the same interview with *Downbeat* magazine, the author and interviewer writes:

> Working over 'Cherokee' with Fleet, Charlie suddenly found that by using higher intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes, he could play this thing he'd been 'hearing.' Fleet picked it up behind him and bop was born.

This incredibly inadequate explanation of the birth of a musical style contains no mention of rhythm whatsoever. One reason for this is that many music scholars, especially in the early years of jazz writing, came from a background of European classical tradition, which simply does not contain the means to recognize or discuss many of the rhythmic devices that are found in jazz. The studies that do deal with rhythm are largely written about the phenomenon of expressive timing. In his article "Time Warps in Early Jazz," Fernando Benadon defines expressive timing as "a process whereby a rhythmic template is transformed into a new rhythm that departs from the metric grid." In other words, a soloist phrasing in such a way that they no longer adhere to the rhythms inherent in the underlying pulse of the piece would be considered expressive timing. It is the metric grid itself, the pulse, which this paper

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4 Guitarist Biddy Fleet


will focus on. Vijay Iyer, a renowned jazz pianist and authority on music cognition, also comments on the lack of pulse-centered study and the importance of this pulse to the music:

In groove contexts, musicians display a heightened, seemingly microscopic sensitivity to musical timing (on the order of a few milliseconds) . . . While numerous studies have dissected the nuances of expressive ritardandi and other tempo-modulating rhythmic phenomena . . . there have been few careful quantitative studies that focus on expressive timing with respect to an isochronous pulse. In groove-based contexts, even as the tempo remains constant, fine-scale rhythmic delivery becomes just as important a parameter as, say, tone, pitch, or loudness.  

My interest in this topic arose in large part from my own personal experience as a professional bassist and my frustrating initial attempts to learn the rhythmic vocabulary of this music. This frustration was mostly due to a lack of clear explanations and differentiations that clarified the nuances that I heard. In other words, I had a hard time learning to swing, the ultimate goal of an effective pulse in jazz. By tracing the personal and artistic influence of musicians upon each other, examining related technical and cultural developments and by comparing and analyzing recordings, I will demonstrate in this paper that the revolution in the inception of bebop is primarily rhythmic rather than harmonic. In doing so, I hope that I can perhaps alleviate the frustrations of other musicians who find themselves in the same place that I was several years ago, and also help to fill a somewhat unfortunate gap in the realm of music scholarship. I expect to develop a fairly technical explanation of the rhythmic growth in bebop as one product of this study,

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An 'isochronous pulse' simply means that the spaces between each pulse in a given musical performance are the same, that the pulses have the same periodicity or frequency.
but I would like to clarify that such a product is not intended for a student of jazz to use as more than a guideline or idea. With the help of digital technology, it has become possible to microscopically analyze the microrhythmic aspects of a musical performance in a measurable way. Though this is informative for study of the music, it is not necessarily a favorable tool for a performer. As Schuller points out:

These rhythmic impulses – both the notes a musician is actually playing and the pulse underlying those notes, whether in a 2-bar break or a seven-minute improvisation – must be felt. They cannot be calculated, counted, intellectually arrived at, and still produce swing... When swing occurs it is innate, not studied... it is produced in the not fully conscious realms, but is governed by the conscious mind. 8

That being said, I hope that readers of this paper find it helpful, and that it paints a clearer picture of a significant and regrettably under-represented crossroads in the history of American music.

Definition of Terms

Pulse – I will use part of Iyer’s definition of pulse, specifically that, “literally, pulse denotes any periodicity inherent or perceived in any rhythm or combination of rhythms.” Within the context of this paper, this generally means isochronous quarter notes, as interpreted by rhythm section, in particular the bass instrument. The factors affecting this interpretation are, firstly, timing, both in relation to strict evenness and in relation to other musicians, and also timbre and attack and decay qualities. I also would like to discuss subdivision of the quarter note, whether it be by the rhythm

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section or another ensemble member, as being a characteristic of the quarter note itself, again taking a bit of insight from Iyer:

An immediate consequence of the swing feel is that it suggests the next level of hierarchical organization. In conventional terms, the swung eighth-note pairs are perceptually grouped into the larger regular interval, that is, the quarter note. If all subdivisions were performed with exactly the same duration, it would be more difficult to perceive the main beat. The lengthening of the first of two swung notes in a pair amounts to a durational accentuation of the beat.9

So, in this study, though the focus will be the pulse or quarter note in its various forms, equal consideration will be given to subdivisions of the quarter note as an aspect of the pulse. Iyer’s proposal is that swung eighth-note pairs are subservient to the quarter note, that they function to accentuate it and influence the character of it.

Beat—Because this term is one that is notoriously confused, I am going to refrain from including it in the vocabulary of this paper whenever possible, but here are some ways in which it is commonly used. The first is in a way that is roughly equivalent to pulse, in that it refers to a regular recurring periodicity, an accented (whether the accent is literal or implied) measure of time. Beat is also often used to refer to a theoretical point of metronomic tempo, which is a definition that probably developed in response to the idea of musicians playing in front, behind, or on the beat. It can also refer very generally to the rhythmic feel of a performance, for example Parker’s description of ‘the beat’ in jazz. The most necessary version of the meaning is that of a measure of time, for example, the presence of four beats in a bar of 4/4 time.

Downbeat – This word usually describes the first beat of a measure, but in addition to this meaning, I will use downbeat to refer to the strong beats of a measure, beats one, two, three and four in a bar of 4/4, as opposed to upbeats, the subdivisions of these beats.

Swing – Swing is universally one of the most difficult aspects of this music to define, generally speaking, which is perhaps one of the reasons it is so often un-discussed. It has come to mean that the underlying subdivision of a given piece of music is triplet-based, rather than duple, and while this is true, it is inadequate. This definition will be represented by the term swing-rhythm. Schuller, gives a very thorough definition of another version of the word swing:

Swing in its most general sense means a regular steady pulse, 'as of a pendulum,' as one Webster definition puts it. On a more specific level, it signifies the accurate timing of a note in its proper place. If this were the entire definition, however, most 'classical' music could be said to swing. In analyzing the swing element in jazz, we find that there are two characteristics which do not occur in 'classical' music: (1) a specific type of accentuation and inflection with which notes are played or sung, and (2) the continuity - the forward-propelling directionality - with which individual notes are linked together. Seen another way, 'swing' is a force that maintains the perfect equilibrium between the horizontal and vertical relationships of musical sounds.²

This forward propelling directionality linked to rhythmic feel will be referred to as swing-feel. Swing may also refer to the style of music played by the great big bands in the 1930s and early 1940s, which will be denoted as Swing.

Vertical vs. Horizontal – These words are traditionally used to refer to the harmonic and rhythmic aspects of a given piece of music, respectively. I would like to propose

an additional meaning for the context of this paper, which Schuller hints at in the above quote, in which both words are related to aspects of rhythm. This will also become much clearer throughout the course of the paper, with the aid of aural examples. Vertical will describe the short, downbeat-heavy rhythmic feel of earlier styles of jazz, in contrast to later styles, which have a very distinct forward, linear, or horizontal, momentum.

European Classical Music – This is admittedly a bit of a sweepingly general term, but for the purposes of this paper, references to classical music or European classical music will relate to the tradition of music exemplified by such composers as Bach, Brahms, Debussy, Schoenberg, etc.
CHAPTER 2

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PULSE IN AMERICA

African Influence

This chapter will discuss the historical background of some of the rhythmic aspects of jazz and bebop leading up to this evolution of pulse, in the interest of gaining a better understanding of the transitional period in question. As previously mentioned, I intend to also discuss subdivision as a factor contributing to quality of pulse, and so this chapter will basically take the form of a concise and selective rhythmic history of certain American music. The most useful place to pick up this history is the traditional African music brought to this country with the slave trade, which is the basis for not only much of the rhythmic content of jazz music, but of many underlying musical concepts. There are many traits of African music that were retained in the music’s transformation into an American art form, but this discussion will be limited to those which are the most pressing to the topic of pulse.

It is reasonable to assume, and there is evidence to suggest, that the earliest of African music in America was just that: the traditional music of the African culture being reproduced in the most authentic fashion possible under the circumstances by displaced African men and women. Schuller cites nineteenth-century actress and musician Fanny Kemble’s account of her stay on a Georgia plantation in 1839 and her experience with this slave music:
In describing her daily trips up and down the river to the plantation, she writes: “Our boatmen . . . accompany the stroke of their oars with the sound of their voices. I have been quite at a loss to discover any [familiar] foundation for many [of their songs] that I have heard lately, and which have appeared to me extraordinarily wild and unaccountable.” She goes on to praise “the admirable time and true accent” with which the slaves delivered the call and response patterns of these songs.¹

Schuller also mentions comments from the editors of a book called Slave Songs of the United States:

The editors quite frankly admit their inability to cope with the strange rhythms of these songs in conventional notation. “The best we can do with paper and types . . . will convey but a faint shadow of the original . . . The intonation and delicate variations of even one singer cannot be reproduced on paper.”²

So basically, the complexity of this starting point for African-American music defied explanation and even notation in the context of the late 1800s and early 1900s. African music is in part made up of a series of polyrhythmic and polymetric relationships, for example, a constant juxtaposition of duple and triple time in various proportions.³ This incredible rhythmic sophistication, though it is one of the most commonly mentioned traits of African music, does not seem to have survived the transition to African-American musical forms in more than very subtle ways. However, other concepts, perhaps ones that were more compatible with the instruments found in the early Americas and the musical practices that were permitted by slave owners and other authority figures, endured and manifested themselves in what would become jazz music.

¹ Schuller, Early Jazz, 16.
² Schuller, Early Jazz, 17.
³ Schuller, Early Jazz, 6-14.
Perhaps most vitally, the concept of groove comes from the African tradition. This could be described as a consistent rhythmic scheme that is established collectively by musicians playing together, usually in observance of some sort of isochronous pulse. Iyer notes that, “A salient feature of groove-based musics seems to be the attentiveness to an additional unifying rhythmic level below the level of the tactus.” For example, if the quarter note is the tactus, one may also focus on the sixteenth note to heighten rhythmic precision.” Obviously European music has tempo and consistent rhythm, but it is not treated in the same way that it is in these scenarios. In a groove context, for example, expressive ritardandi or accelerandi that might be found in a performance of European art music would be disruptive to the groove. Iyer points out that, “rather, they [grooves] involve miniscule, subtle microtiming deviations from rigid regularity, while maintaining overall pulse isochrony.” Additionally, the value in a groove context is placed on how notes are played, more so than which notes are played, how in tune they are, etc. That is not to say that African music involves a group of musicians all playing or singing random pitches with a good sense of rhythm, but rather just that the way that musicians’ notes relate to each other in a temporal sense is of the utmost importance. This is an aspect of the concept of swing, which was undoubtedly present in a slightly less familiar form in this early music.

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4 'Tactus' refers, basically, to the natural, perceived pulse of a piece of music: the interval of time at which a listener comfortably taps a foot, for example.

5 Iyer, “Microstructures of Feel, Macrostructures of Sound,” chapter 2

6 Iyer, “Microstructures of Feel, Macrostructures of Sound,” chapter 2
The other important aspect of this music to our discussion of pulse that survived is that of timbral ideals. Composer, pianist, bassist, and musicologist Olly Wilson suggests that instrumentation in African-American music evolved in such a way as to stay faithful to preferences of timbral distinction in its African counterparts:

Just as the different tonal colors of various size drums are clearly differentiated from each other and from the gongs, rattles, hand clapping, and voices in West African music so we find that the typical violin, banjo, bones, and tambourine of the eighteenth century or the clarinet, trumpet, trombone, guitar, bass and drum set of early twentieth century Afro-American music maintain this independence of voices by means of timbral differentiation. Iyer mentions this timbral distinction in his writing as well, noting that, "timing variations can allow an instrument that is sonically buried to draw attention to itself in the auditory scene." This has a key relationship to pulse, as will be explored later in discussion of specific musicians.

Dixieland, Ragtime, and the Two Feel

The next musical landmark I would like to discuss is ragtime, one of the first recorded and first fully matured pre-jazz styles to blossom out of the Afro-American concept. Ragtime was popular in America from the late 1890s until about 1920, and was in large part the creation of pianist and composer Scott Joplin. There are two main musical influences here that are noteworthy and illuminating. The first is the march, from which ragtime derives its three or four-part form (in contrast to the African-derived forms like blues, which are one-part), much of its harmony, and most


importantly, a steady 2/4 pulse. The other stimulus at work, though slight, is the traditional African music previously discussed.

As an example, I will cite Scott Joplin’s own piano roll of his famed composition “Maple Leaf Rag.” Though the copyright for this composition is from 1899, this roll was made in 1916, when the means were available for such a reproduction. In recorded example 1⁹, we hear the steady octave downbeats and chord upbeats in the left hand, similar to the stride style of piano playing that would be popular in the 1920s and 30s on the East coast. These downbeats are short and punctuated, the duration not much longer than a sixteenth note at the same tempo. This is not surprising considering the distance the left hand has to move in the short amount of time between the bass octaves and the higher-register chords. The right hand, which is playing almost constant sixteenth notes throughout much of the piece, subdivides very evenly. Though there is no semblance of swing-rhythm or of the triplet here, the right hand part of this piece is where we find the aforementioned African influence. Joplin routinely groups the streams of sixteenth notes in the treble staff in threes, contrasting the steady duple eighth notes of the left hand. Though he resolves each of these instances after a bar, this is a blatant example of the polyrhythmic aspects of traditional African music.¹⁰ The right hand, though it is rhythmically interesting, does not seem to have any considerable bearing on the quality of the pulse of this performance. The hands are basically synchronous and the same timbre; other than increasing the accuracy and consistency of the left hand by


¹⁰ See 0:44 of CD track 1.
subdividing and occasionally accenting some offbeats, the right hand does not work against the pulse established by the left hand.

From here, the next important musical developments actually had a decisive absence of clear bass accompaniment, relatively speaking, and this is possibly why triplet swing feel began to take place. As mentioned earlier, Iyer theorizes that the reason for the uneven eighth-note pairs found in jazz is that they “suggest the next level of hierarchical organization.” Because of the instrumental configuration of these early groups, this unevenness may have been necessary to keep the downbeats clear and keep the musicians together. In the earliest jazz groups, the ensemble extensions of ragtime piano and Dixieland, the only bass player was often the pianist’s left hand. This was perfectly adequate in the context of a solo piano piece, but in a multi-instrument ensemble, the piano was quickly lost.

There are two recordings from this period that I would like to examine. The first is “Livery Stable Blues,” recorded in 1916 by the Original Dixieland Jass Band. The Original Dixieland Jass Band is notorious for being the first white band to capitalize on the developments of black musicians of the period, which makes it more worth our while to look at this recording. This band is essentially a group of talented imitators, and their music is closer rhythmically to the European march than to anything swing-related. The instrumentation is piano, drums, trombone, cornet, and clarinet, with the trombone filling both a melodic and a somewhat downbeat-oriented bass function. This performance as a whole does not contain swing-rhythms.

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However, around 49 seconds into the recording,\textsuperscript{13} the trombone wavers in its downbeat function after the band makes an awkward comeback from a four-bar break, causing the clarinetist to swing, just for a bar. Instead of the downbeats and upbeats occupying 50% and 50% of a single quarter note, respectively, as is found in “Maple Leaf Rag” and in all of the other instruments in “Livery Stable Blues”, the clarinetist plays downbeats that account for about 66% of the quarter note and upbeats that are about 34%. This makes the downbeats clear, and everyone stays together, despite the unclean entrance.

I made these analyses by using the computer program Audacity. My method was to slow down the recording in question until I could accurately map note onset by listening carefully and by watching the waveforms. I could then measure distance between downbeats, subdivisions, etcetera, and develop a ratio that represented the degree of unevenness. This method was fairly effective and very straightforward, but was slightly limited in certain cases by the quality of recordings available to me. In analyzing a soloistic instrument, for example, such as the clarinet mentioned above, it was easy to discern the attacks of that instrument form the rest of the band. It was next to impossible, on the other hand, to measure the degree of unevenness of a drummer’s cymbal pattern with accuracy. Joplin’s playing in “Maple Leaf Rag” is almost perfectly even, as is much of the playing in “Livery Stable Blues,” with the exception of the single bar of clarinet.

I would also like to point out a recording by King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band of

\textsuperscript{13} For the original recording, see CD track 2. For a slowed-down version of the specific bar of clarinet, see track 3.
the tune “Dippermouth Blues.” This recording,\textsuperscript{14} made in 1923, has a similar instrumentation (two cornets, trombone, clarinet, banjo, piano and drums), but the trombone does not double as a grounding bass instrument. The banjo strums quarter notes but besides this and the drummer, whose part is quite woodblock-heavy, there is no grounding pulse instrument. However, the whole piece is swung. Oliver himself tends to play downbeats that are about 70\% of the quarter note and upbeats that are about 30\%. There are no awkward entrances, no misinterpreted eighth notes. The swing rhythm keeps the group together.

The Tuba, the Bass, and the Four Feel

The next logical step musically was the addition of a true bass instrument. With the swung, bass-less instrumental model, downbeats were strongly implied by the melodic instruments but nothing proportional to the amount of sound produced by the lead instruments was actually present. The sound was top-heavy. Groups like this needed a large sound that could take up enough space to account for everyone’s various interpretations of the downbeat without providing so clear an attack as to make any of them sound wrong. Tuba, an instrument that had already been anchoring marching bands and brass bands for years, was the fit for this. The attack of a tuba playing heavy downbeats was powerful and wide, but could still have a relatively quick decay. The pulse generated by tuba bass was weightier, however, and the tuba generally sounded as though it was lagging behind the treble instruments and drums. This may be a function of the more gradual attack envelope of a low brass instrument,

as opposed to a drum or cymbal, for example, but it is clear upon analysis that the onset and the body of the tuba note falls behind the rest of the ensemble. A standard tuba part in an ensemble like this mirrored what the pianist’s left hand was doing and what tubists had been doing in marching bands. A prime example of this is Joe Tarto’s performance in violinist Joe Venuti’s group on the track entitled “I Must Be Dreaming,” recorded in 1928. At about 0:10, Tarto enters, playing weighty notes on beats one and three that are heard minutely after the drummer’s attacks. The ensemble’s layers of eighth-note lines are a bit tamer on this recording than on King Oliver’s or the Original Dixieland Jass Band’s, but the slight inconsistency of downbeats is still audible. Slowed down 60%, we can clearly hear the difference in timing between Tarto’s downbeats and the downbeats of the rest of the ensemble. Halway through this slowed example, we hear the trombonist articulate a downbeat, almost a sixteenth-note ahead of Tarto.

Tuba was adequate for a time until the string bass began to grow in popularity and practicality. As recording became a more commonplace and accessible activity and recording technology improved, musical goals of bands expanded to include this burgeoning commercial and artistic avenue. Wellman Braud, Duke Ellington’s tubist and bassist in the early part of his career, was one of the first to succeed on string bass. Bassist and bass historian John Goldsby notes in his publication The Jazz Bass Book that “Wellman Braud’s big, explosive sound showed how the upright, with

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16 See CD track 6.

17 Other notable bassists that bridged the brass bass to string bass gap include Milt Hinton and John Kirby.
proper miking, could record better than the tuba.” Braud also proved that string bass could be loud enough to use in a dance hall. Until Braud, tuba or sousaphone was preferred in these settings for the sake of sheer volume. In the recording of Ellington’s “Washington Wabble” from 1927, we hear Braud do a variety of things including slapping, a technique that involves pulling the strings away from the fingerboard and letting them snap back, creating a sharp attack with a quick decay, and even some bowing. Most notably, at around 0:30, he plays in 4/4. Braud (though he was not the first to experiment with this) plays what is termed a ‘four feel’: four notes per bar of 4/4 time. This is the single most important innovation of the string bass in terms of its effect on pulse, and it would open the door to every development that would come after. The tuba was incapable of playing a four feel simply because a musician playing the tuba had to breathe and could not maintain continuous sound.

At this point in history, the pulse is still decidedly vertical feeling. The downbeats are heavy and the subdivisions played by the band, though much more consistent and precise than their predecessors in the Original Dixieland Jass Band, are still stiff and lack forward momentum. However, this is the grandfather generation to bebop. In just ten more years a new rhythmic vocabulary would begin to take hold, pulled by the momentum of this new rhythm section dynamic.

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The period from the mid 1920s to the late 1930s was in many ways the awkward teenage phase for pulse in African-American music. These years were full of bands that were trying to straddle the previous traditions in a way that made sense, bands that were playing in two, bands that were playing in four, bands that were loyal to Dixieland and ragtime, and bands that were devoted to the burgeoning style of Swing. The one unifying factor was an unassailable creative energy, fueled by the increasingly rapid spread of new ideas. Somewhere in this volatility (1923), a band was formed called the Oklahoma City Blue Devils. This ensemble and its bassist and leader, Walter Page, whose influence has gone largely unheralded, managed to quietly absorb the sea of rhythmic influence that was developing in the early twentieth century and integrate it into a workable model of pulse.

Initially, the Blue Devils were a stylistically all-encompassing band, as any group of the period undoubtedly had to be to acquire steady work. They could play in two and in four, and Page could play not only bass, but also tuba and baritone saxophone, reportedly quite well. The major innovation of this group in its infancy was its rhythm section instrumentation (bass, guitar, piano and drums), which would

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1 Daniels, *One O'Clock Jump*, 13.
soon become the standard for contemporary swing groups. The timbral combination of this instrumentation (with Page on bass) is optimal for producing an incredibly propellant pulse, as will be discussed later.

Page cited the previously mentioned Ellington bassist, Wellman Braud, as a major influence. As he told record producer Frank Driggs, "Braud is my daddy. That's why I have the big beat." Expanding on the work of Braud and other bassists of that school, Page made the next influential leap in pulse character: not just playing in four, but playing legato, connected quarter notes. A bassist of immense subtlety, Page used the same slap technique that Braud and many bassists of the day did, but managed to do it without the rebounding slap sound. This created a warm, full, round tone that could sustain much longer, as opposed to the short, sharp tone of the slapped note, which decayed very quickly. Mark Tucker, a pianist and researcher known for his scholarship on Ellington and other jazz luminaries, notes Page's influence on the feel of a band:

Schuller has called attention to the fluidity and 'relaxed propulsion' of his bass lines . . . But Page brought other qualities to bands. With his big sound and powerful technique - 'He was like a house with a note,' Eddie Durham has said - Page allowed both the drummer and the pianist's left hand to lighten up. This in turn brought about a shift in the dynamic balance of the rhythm section.3

This particular shift would later free the pianist and drummer to interact with the rest of the band, as is common in bebop playing. There is also a noticeable difference in where Page's note attacks fall relative to the rest of his band. While in

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Despite the myth that early jazz musicians were untrained, it is fairly clear that the original Devils were not musical illiterates... Their band was a veritable school for untutored musicians, and they performed for different social classes and occasions – not only in the black community but for white audiences as well.6

Not only was the band itself a sort of institution, but also several members of the Blue Devils actually taught music at a local college. Douglas Henry Daniels writes:

They were instructors at the Coleridge Taylor School of Music in Oklahoma’s capitol. Late one autumn afternoon in 1923, the Coleridge Taylor Choral Club gave its first recital, and William C. Lewis and W. S. Page were its directors... Interestingly, the Dispatch reported that Walter Page “will also render a cello solo on his new $700 cello, which has just been purchased,” evidence of the bassist’s prosperity.

From the Pythian Temple, at 206 East Second Street, the three professors... offered classes to prosperous members of Oklahoma City’s black community. Walter Page’s specialties were violin, cello, reed instruments and harmony, while Lawrence Williams instructed in cornet and other wind instruments, and William C. Lewis taught German and French, indicating the importance of the European tradition in the school that was named after the famous black composer of classical music.7

Count Basie

Page’s influence does not end with the college and the community. Of the alumni of the Blue Devils are several musicians who would be of particularly notable influence on the course of American music. Perhaps the most famous of this group is William ‘Count’ Basie, a pianist from New Jersey who would be brought to the South


7 Daniels, One O’Clock Jump, 29-30.
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7 Daniels, One O’Clock Jump, 29-30.
with Bennie Moten’s band. Of the Devils alums, Basie is probably the one whose playing was most directly and noticeably impacted.

When Count Basie arrived in the South from New Jersey, he was basically a stride piano virtuoso, having been heavily influenced by the likes of Fats Waller and Jelly Roll Morton. His playing was busy and flashy and it’s been noted that he outplayed Moten, who was also a pianist, causing Moten to later give more and more playing and band-leading responsibility to Basie.\(^8\) In 1928, Basie was hired into Walter Page’s Blue Devils. Blue Devils vocalist Jimmy Rushing has said that Basie “couldn’t play the blues then.”\(^9\) As Mark Tucker notes, “It seems quite likely that Walter Page played a significant role in transforming Basie’s style at the keyboard.”\(^10\) Tucker asserts that the style that Basie developed between his initial time in the Blue Devils and this point is a style learned from Page, who preached restraint, taste, and overall, sensitive ensemble playing. Basie supports this theory, having later said that “Hearing them [the Blue Devils] . . . was probably the most important turning point in my musical career so far as my notions about what kind of music I really wanted to try to play was concerned,” and also, “There was such a team spirit among those guys and it came out in the music.”\(^11\)

Just a few years later, Basie had been converted into an incredibly sparse player, a master accompanist, and most importantly, an expert at using his colorful

\(^8\) See CD track 9, a clip from ‘Toby,’ Bennie Moten’s Kansas City Orchestra, 1932. Bennie Moten’s Kansas City Orchestra, “Toby,” On Jazz, Volume Ten: Boogie Woogie and Jump, Folkways FJ 2810, 1953, CD.

\(^9\) Tucker, Count Basie.

\(^10\) Tucker, Count Basie.

\(^11\) Daniels, One O'Clock Jump, 13
interjections to ornament the pulse. It is notable that ensembles that contained Page and Basie, specifically the Blue Devils and Basie’s own band, actually showcased the feel of the rhythm section by giving them sort of groove choruses. In these instances, Basie might solo sparsely and coloristically, Page would walk in four, the drummer and guitarist would continue their duties, and the rest of the band would drop out entirely. These choruses might vaguely feature Page or Basie, but really the fantastic ensemble playing of the rhythm section and the swing feel was the focus.

In 1935, the Blue Devils had been disbanded because of problems with money and Count Basie and Walter Page were both back in Bennie Moten’s band. Moten passed away in April of that year and Count Basie took over the group. This became the famous Count Basie Orchestra, known for its unmatched swing feel. The rhythm section of this band, which quickly attained legendary status across the country and the nickname ‘The All-American Rhythm Section,’ was a foursome of Walter Page protégés. The lineup was Walter Page on exclusively string bass, Basie on piano, Jo Jones on drums and Freddie Green on guitar. All of these musicians except Green were products of the Blue Devils school. John Goldsby notes Jones’s devotion to Page, writing that “Jo Jones, a legend in his own right, credits Page as his ‘musical father... because without him, I wouldn’t have known how to play drums.’” Jones is also quoted in *One O'Clock Jump* as having declared, “He was the father of us all,” speaking about the musicians in the Blue Devils. Daniels also mentions Jones

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12 See CD track 10, a clip from ‘Dickie’s Dream,’ Count Basie’s Kansas City Seven, 1939 William “Count” Basie and his Kansas City Seven, “Dickie’s Dream,” *On Jazz, Volume Ten: Boogie Woogie and Jump*, Folkways FJ 2810, 1953, CD.

claiming that Green had to change his playing under Page’s tutelage, and that in his early years with the band, Page would routinely tell Green, “No, it don’t go like that.”

In all of its innovations, the All-American Rhythm Section arguably perfected the swing pulse, standardizing a horizontal, linear feel. Page was the center of it, having by this point lengthened the duration of the quarter note and inched its onset a hair earlier than other bass players. Green reinforced the attack by strumming consistent quarter-notes that decayed quickly. Because of the nature of this action on a guitar, every strum produces up to six (the number of strings) smaller attacks that are minutely close together, creating a sound that is as much if not more percussive than harmonic. This sound was the front of every quarter note in this rhythm section. Basie’s contribution, as has been discussed, was lightening up from the heavy-handed East Coast style and playing subdivisions in the upper register of the keyboard. Needless to say, these are swung and therefore accentuate the downbeats, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Jo Jones, as written in his bio on Drummerworld’s website,

Redefined the concept of a drummer. He lightened up on the four-beats-to-the-bar standard of bass drum playing, was possibly the first to use the ride cymbal as the main timekeeping accessory, and did things with the hi-hats that are still being studied today.

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14 Daniels, *One O’Clock Jump*, 177.

15 For an example of this, see CD track 11, “Lester Leaps In,” 1939, performed by Count Basie’s Kansas City Seven. On *Jazz, Volume Ten*, 1953.

Schuller writes: “That the Basie band has been from its inception a master of swing could hardly be disputed. It is and always has been a magnificent 'swing machine.'”  

Non-Musical Factors

It would seem reasonable to assume that numerous technological advances over the course of the years discussed would also affect this new model of pulse, but in truth, with a few exceptions, the evolution to this new style was mostly musician-induced. One of the most frequently cited upgrades by bassists in this transition is the switch from gut to steel strings. Bass strings have been historically problematic because of their size, which makes it incredibly difficult to achieve consistency throughout the length of the string. This lack of consistency often caused variations in pitch, especially in the upper register. Steel strings, besides alleviating these issues, increased the capacity for technical facility. Paul Brun, author of *A New History of the Double Bass,* writes:

A major, life-transforming breakthrough occurred in the 1930's when, following ten years of research, Pierre Delescluse in France developed the first complete set of metal strings for double bass. Responsible for great advances in technical facility, they have truly turned a lumbering elephant into a quick-footed tiger. Bringing about a general advancement of bass standards and performance, they have opened new areas of technical skill... It is significant that in the 1950s Walter Piston mentioned that complete sets of metal strings were increasingly being adopted by double bass players,

although some felt at the time that, whatever its other shortcomings, the natural substance (i.e. gut) produced a finer sound.\textsuperscript{18}

This account makes it seem unlikely that Page would have been using steel strings in the Southwest US in the 1930s. It’s also worth considering the fact that Wellman Braud, Page’s self-proclaimed ‘daddy,’ had his heyday before steel strings were even invented. Also, frankly, Page sounds as though he is playing gut strings. Brun also says of gut strings:

Gut strings produced a strong fundamental. They had a deep, warm and rich background sound, but with a somewhat nasal tone quality. . . They required rather high action and tended to be responsible for an extraneous surface noise of the bow hair. Plucked solos in the high positions didn’t ring out very much but sounded choked and laboured.\textsuperscript{19}

This basically describes Page’s sound, though we don’t hear him with a bow. The other bass-related development that began to gain popularity around WWII era US was the amplifier, but this was also not common during Page’s time and didn’t really catch on till the later 1940s and early 50s. This delay was not any issue with development of the amplifier itself as a technology but with microphones and pickups. These technologies for bass are still far from perfected, even today.

Perhaps the most important technological factor that plays into this equation is recording technology. Obviously, every single analytical observation in this paper is based on a representation of each musician on a recording that was produced to the best possible quality of its time. It is quite possible that the improvements in bass sound, bass note duration and general dynamic coherence of recordings contributed to the present study’s perception as much as actual improvements in playing and in

\textsuperscript{18} Paul Brun, \textit{A New History of the Double Bass} (France: Paul Brun Productions, 2000), 212-213.

\textsuperscript{19} Brun, \textit{A New History of the Double Bass}, 211.
musical concepts. It is difficult to find information on recording practices from this period, and so it is unclear what the setup would have been in a recording session. For example, if the bass player were significantly closer to the microphone than the drummer because of the volume of the drums, it is worth speculation that the result on the recording could be the bass player sounding as though he is ever so slightly ahead of the drummer, or visa versa. In the case of the Basie band, however, just about every performance video or photograph depicts the bassist and drummer next to each other in the back of the band, and it seems unlikely that the group would change their setup entirely for a recording. There is also the fact that Basie’s live recordings don’t sound markedly different in terms of pulse or otherwise from the studio recordings, indicating that if there were changes in setup and spacing in the studio, they probably didn’t have a significant impact.

There were, however, changes in the technology of vinyl during this period, and these could be significant. *The Audiophile’s Technical Guide to 78 RPM, Transcription, and Microgroove Recordings* says the following: “After 1935 to the beginning of WWII, there were efforts to increase recording level and dynamic range, particularly with American recordings.” And also, “The year 1937 seems to have been a turning point in revelations about disc recording technology. . . Adjustments to the recording equipment as well as to the bass and treble compensation could be made to obtain the best sounding records.” If technology was a factor in the change of the

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rhythmic feel of jazz on recording, this specific development is most likely the culprit.
The influence of the Blue Devils does not end with the masterful swing of the Basie band. Two saxophonists came from the Devils that would later be the two primary influences on bebop trendsetter Charlie Parker: Buster Smith and Lester Young. Altoist Smith encountered the Blue Devils while they were stranded in his home city of Dallas, Texas. It is not known whether Smith received instruction on playing from the Devils, but it is worth considering that Page, who was a teacher of reed instruments, may have given advice to the young player. Smith would later mention that Page "played a good baritone sax." Smith was somewhat of a local star in Dallas, and the Devils hired him before they left in 1927. The Devils were the first large ensemble he had played with. Daniels writes:

Smith must have been reluctant to join them because he told them he could not read music, but they answered, "That's all right. Read the... books and you can start right on the course." ... In another instance, because he was new to the band and did not know the arrangements, Page cued him with a whistle when it was time for him to come in.²

By the time Lester Young was recruited in 1931, Smith, who would later earn the nickname 'Professor,' had progressed so much that Young would later comment, "I

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¹ Daniels, One O'Clock Jump, 42.
² Daniels, One O'Clock Jump, 42.
remember Buster Smith. I played with him in the Thirteen Original Blue Devils led by Walter Page. Buster used to write all the arrangements and he could play crazy alto and clarinet. Oh, he could blow.”

Young would gain more from Page’s influence a few years later, in Count Basie’s band, which is where he achieved stardom. Schuller wrote about this period: “In its [the Basie band’s] linear concept of swing and uncongested, (at first) largely unarranged, airy-textured approach, it was the ideal setting for Lester. It was one in which he could flourish and grow . . .” The unique swing feel and quality of pulse in this ensemble allowed Young to develop his personal style in a way that the rigidity of earlier swing might not have. Lester would later say of playing with this section: “The Basie rhythm section was good because they played together and everybody in it was playing rhythm. They played for you to play when you were taking a solo. They weren’t playing solos behind you.” And also, “You have to have a nice rhythm section. When you get a rhythm section that doesn’t swing, you can’t do what you want to do.” Young’s playing, his rhythmic and harmonic experimentations, was dependant on a certain dialect of rhythmic feeling, which he found in the Basie rhythm section. This style that Young developed during his tenure playing with Page, Jones, Basie and Green was the precursor to what Parker would begin to play a few years later. Schuller writes about this:

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5 Again, see CD track 11, which features Young as tenor saxophone soloist.

6 Nat Hentoff, “Pres.”
... he [Lester Young] had... created a completely new aesthetic of jazz... the essence of his heritage is that he proposed a totally new alternative to the language, grammar, and vocabulary of jazz, one that broke away from the prevailing Armstrong tradition and did so incisively, unequivocally – and unapologetically.7

This new vocabulary, though Parker would deny it later, is the basis for bebop. The swing era pulse established by Page and Basie provided the foundation for a new interpretation of subdivision, explored by Young and elaborated upon by Parker.

Parker and The Blue Devils

The history of alto saxophonist Charlie Parker is one of the most difficult to follow with clarity and accuracy, simply because of the huge body of writing that concerns him. Some of it is based on Parker’s own words, much of it is based on accounts from other musicians, and still more is rumor of his actions and speculative legend. It is certain though, from his playing and his history, that Parker is completely a product of the Southwestern United States’ lineage of jazz.

Parker was not initially a virtuoso or even necessarily of any outstanding talent. Quite the contrary, he was often considered lazy, and his first attempts in the jazz scene were met with ridicule and rejection. Parker recounts the first experience he had at a jam session in Kansas City: “I was doing all right until I tried doing double tempo on ‘Body and Soul... Everybody fell out laughing. I went home and

7 Schuller, The Swing Era, 547.
cried and didn’t play again for three months.” This account, besides illustrating Parker’s initial failure, suggests his early attempts at rhythmic sophistication; though it was not new at that point, double tempo (or double time) is a device that functions based largely on rhythmic tension. Contemporary saxophonist and innovator Steve Coleman mentions this early facet of Parker’s playing, noting, “Overall, Bird had a very rhythmic conception even in his formative years, and it was this conception that most contributed to the change in the direction of music during that time.”

Fortunately, Parker didn’t give up after this first negative experience, and tried again at a jam session that happened to be with Count Basie’s band. This story especially, recounted here by bassist Gene Ramey, is one that has been re-told to the point of legendry:

In particular, I remember one night when we were to jam with Basie. Jo Jones waited until Bird started to play and then, as an expression of his feeling, took his cymbal off and threw it almost the complete distance of the dance floor. It fell with a tremendous crash, and Bird, humiliated, just packed up his horn and walked out.

Because of what happens next, this story establishes the late 1930s Basie band as the standard to be reached for young Charlie Parker. Ira Gitler, author of Jazz Masters of the Forties, writes about Parker’s reaction to this jam session: “This time, however, he didn’t stop playing. In the summer of 1937, he joined the band of George E. Lee, the brother of Julia Lee, and went off to nearby Ozark Mountain resorts. With him Parker took all Count Basie’s records, from which he learned

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Lester Young’s solos inside out.”11 This period was the high point of the Basie-
Young relationship and so it is notable that after being shamed by the Basie rhythm
section, Parker went off to learn all of the solos from Basie’s star tenor player.

Young was, as mentioned, exploring a new vocabulary, and it is clear that Parker
absorbed his style during this period. Conflictingly, however, Parker would late be
quoted as saying, “I was crazy about Lester . . . He played so clean and beautiful. But
I wasn’t influenced by Lester. Our ideas ran differently.”12

Blue Devils alum Buster Smith was also of great importance to Parker in this
same period, though whether his or Young’s influence came first is not clear. Gitler
writes, “In 1937, Parker was in the band of Buster Smith, the alto saxophonist who
was an early influence on his playing. Smith had known him for about five years
before he joined the band. ‘Charlie would come in where we were playing,’ Smith
has said, ‘and hang around the stand with his horn under his arm.’"13 Parker would
soon join Smith’s band, during which time Smith was Parker’s mentor. Parker must
have picked up a significant amount about playing the saxophone from Smith, as the
latter was quite a technician, an attribute which Parker very decisively possessed in
his more fully-developed years. Smith (or Professor, as he was known) said later,
“He always wanted me to take the first solo . . . I guess he though he’d learn
something that way. He did play like me quite a bit, I guess. But after a while,

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anything I could make on my horn, he could make too – and make something better out of it.”

Parker’s Realization

Within the next year or two, Parker’s own artistry would begin to flourish, and in these early periods, despite Parker’s claims otherwise, the influence of Lester Young is readily apparent. In analyzing Parker’s playing, it is evident that there are some new devices at work, and that these are largely extensions of old ideas. The earliest known recording of Parker is from 1937, according to its owner (though some think it’s probably closer to 1940) and is particularly interesting because it is just unaccompanied alto saxophone, making it easy to hear Parker’s ideas. The most immediately striking feature is Parker’s obvious and complete internalization of the pulse; the performance is incredibly accurate in terms of consistency of tempo, almost as though there were a rhythm section playing with him. There are two or three instances where the pulse strays briefly, but it is always recovered, and recovered correctly. The second feature of interest is Parker’s eighth notes, which have a life all their own. The subdivisions here range in degree of swing, some being almost even eighth notes, some closer to a dotted-eighth-sixteenth rhythm. The phenomenon of


16 It is actually possible to put a metronome to this recording of Parker, though there are moments where he strays slightly. I have considered the possibility that there is, in fact, a rhythm section that is lost in the poor quality of the recording, but it seems doubtful, as Parker switches to playing a different tune suddenly in the middle of the recording. The first bit is Parker improvising on the chord changes of Fats Waller’s ‘Honeysuckle Rose,’ while the second half is very clearly the song ‘Body and Soul.’
ungrounded eighth-notes, which is certainly a Young-ism, is partially due to the players' internalization of the quarter note. With the reign of the Basie band's standard of groove came this allegiance to the quarter note, the pulse, as an overarching and doctrinal musical device, hence these players' observance of it, even if they are straying from it. This collective observance alleviates the necessity to make the pulse obvious to other players, as in the case of the Original Dixieland Jass Band, because everyone is already considering the pulse as the primary foundational element of the music. With their function no longer needed, swing eighth notes became another expressive element that Young and Parker employed prominently.

Despite all this talk about rhythm, it is undeniable that the actual pitch content of Parker and Young's playing during this period is brilliant and new. The ultimate result of this radically new approach is again, an extension of Young and a product of the new model of pulse. Schuller mentions (as quoted earlier) Young proposing a new vocabulary of jazz improvisation that is an alternative to the Armstrong tradition. The Armstrong tradition is one of essentially melodic improvising, a descendant of the generation that championed literal embellishment of the melody of a piece of music as a means of soloing. Parker's extension of Young's ideas is a massive step towards an almost entirely harmonic approach to improvising. While the earlier tradition created musical tension by playing lines that had linear melodic direction, Parker's approach creates tension by manipulating harmonic material, by using chord substitutions, extensions, parallel structures, etc. This is blatant even in 1940, in the 'Honeysuckle Rose' recording. Because of the force of the new model of pulse, the inherent horizontal motion of the underlying metric grid, horn players of the bebop
era no longer had to worry about playing in such a way that generated melodic linear momentum. They simply had to adhere to the pulse.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The transition from the rhythmic styles of early jazz and swing to the contemporary, sophisticated vocabulary that is bebop is a multi-faceted and complex period and though there are innumerable more topics, musicians, and angles that could be discussed, rhythm is the heart of the matter. This is not, I believe, the only path traceable to arrive at the musical conclusion that is bebop, nor that Walter Page single-handedly changed the face of jazz, but it is clear that Page, through his influence on musical pulse and on his bandmates, namely Count Basie, Jo Jones, Freddie Green, Buster Smith and Lester Young, had a significant impact on the rhythmic conception of a new style. Jones felt strongly enough about this to claim, "Without Mr. Walter Page you never would have heard of Jimmy Rushing; you never would have heard of Lester Young; you never would have heard of Jo Jones, you never would have heard of Charlie Parker because Buster Smith is there and he's still alive."¹ The fact that a new rhythmic concept was behind bebop and that Page was a progenitor of it is apparent.

To recount the rhythmic developments in question, there are three primary reasons that bebop was dependent on Page’s model of pulse. Firstly, the rhythmic implications of duration and decay in early forms of pulse, in contrast to Page’s long,

¹ Daniels, *One O'Clock Jump*, 177.
connected quarter notes, would have clashed with the rhythmic freedom that Parker and Young were striving for. The rhythmic clutter inherently created by space in between notes, such as the style found in early jazz bass instruments, would have foiled attempts at more expressive interpretations of subdivision. Secondly, the new standard for powerfully consistent and internalized time, especially in bass players, and the realization of pulse as primary musical foundation meant that other musicians were no longer chained to the pulse, opening the door to more creative rhythmic ideas in rhythm sections and soloists alike. And thirdly, the harmonic developments into the bebop era were made possible by the new horizontal model of pulse, which took pressure to generate melodic linear momentum off of horn players, allowing them to experiment with new harmonic colors and rhythmic ideas.

There are, admittedly, other avenues unexplored in this study. For example, the claim has been made before that certain social and cultural factors contributed to the change in music. One thought is that the sophisticated rhythmic concept of bebop, in particular its treatment of eighth notes, was intended to foil potential imitators. It is true and noteworthy that the first recording to resemble jazz was made not only by a group of white imitators, but by a group that called themselves the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, and it is reasonable to assume that African-American musicians did not want this to happen again. In the realm of microrhythm, this paper also did not exhaustively explore the possibility of unevenness of subdivision of the bar and its effect on groove, which could be significant. It is feasible that this might occur much in the same way that jazz musicians used uneven eighth note pairs to subdivide the quarter note. It would also be interesting to conduct a more rigorous microtiming
study on the difference in note onset within a rhythm section. It seems probable that
the order in which rhythm section players articulate notes, for example, the difference
in timing between a ride cymbal, a bass note, and a strummed guitar all playing a
quarter note, would have a serious impact on rhythmic feel. However, because of the
level of quality in recordings from the early periods studied here, it is immensely
difficult to discern this timing.

It is also, because of the nature of jazz history, almost impossible to know
with absolute certainty who influenced whom, where or how a certain musician
developed a specific idea, or how precisely the lineage of that idea came to be if there
are not first-person accounts. One can only hope that with time, the state of jazz
scholarship improves to a point that fact can be more easily separated from legend
and speculation from decisive actuality. Furthermore, it is vital that more attention be
given to the rhythmic language that is undoubtedly a primary point of origin,
especially for those hoping to learn, teach, and preserve this incredibly unique and
sophisticated music.
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