

City of the Gabriels:

The Jazz History of St. Louis

by
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St. Louis has made specific contributions to American music over the years. It was the first center for the ragtime music that so infectiously forms one of the roots of jazz. The first great lyrical jazz saxophone stylist, **Frank Trumbauer**, spent much of his early career in St. Louis. Trumbauer's virtuosity, sound and style were the major influences on **Lester Young**, who founded a new saxophone style in the 1930s. A line of St. Louis area trumpeters from **Charles Creath** to **Miles Davis** and **Lester Bowie** changed the way we think about music. Davis changed the course of jazz four times during his career, while Bowie was part of an avant-garde movement in the Midwest that challenged the way jazz has been played. St. Louis has always been racially segregated, but the jazz musicians found ways around this clear back into the 1920s at after hours clubs and gatherings. Because of its tradition of outstanding music instruction in the schools and community bands, St. Louis has sent hundreds of musicians out into the national and international music scene.

Trumpet players have shaped the sound and direction of St. Louis jazz from the beginning.

The sound of a St. Louis trumpet player is unmistakable, whether the trumpeter is **Charles Creath**, **Dewey Jackson**, **Miles Davis**, **Clark Terry** or **Lester Bowie**. Blues from the Mississippi Delta influences the music of St. Louis. It has always had a large and, at times, vibrant blues community. St. Louis music history is also dominated by German brass band traditions. Thus, a trumpet player in St. Louis has the vocal inflections of the Mississippi Delta blues laid over the German brass tradition's singing tone. St. Louis trumpeters use many blues inflections (bent notes), with vocal effects and mutes that are not found in trumpeters

from river cities further to the north. In the 1920s, musicians from the South and St. Louis played jazz in the city, but not on the steamboats that took St. Louis citizens on excursions up and down the river.

In 1939, **Duke Ellington** discovered bassist **Jimmy Blanton** in St. Louis. Blanton soon revolutionized jazz bass playing. After World War II, St. Louis had a vibrant jazz scene in an area called "The DeBaliviere Strip" near the corner of DeBaliviere and Delmar. This scene shifted to Olive and Boyle on "Gaslight Square" during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Many great musicians came out of St. Louis during this period, including trumpeters **Miles Davis** and **Clark Terry**, saxophonists **Jimmy Forrest** and **Chris Woods**, saxophonist-composers **Oliver Nelson** and **Ernie Wilkins** and guitarist **Grant Green**. Gaslight Square employed more musicians on any given night than any other place in the country.

Following the collapse of Gaslight Square, a number of highly influential musicians worked in the city as part of the Black Artists Group. These musicians include saxophonists **Oliver Lake**, **Julius Hemphill** and **Hamiet Bluiett** and trumpeter **Lester Bowie**. All of these musicians left St. Louis by 1973 and went to New York and have had very successful careers. Since 1973, St. Louis has sent many jazz musicians out into the world who have made successful careers elsewhere.

Top left: Miles Davis
Left: Oliver Lake
Above: Clark Terry

