

NICK LARocca, Creator of Jazz

By Linda Serio Published 2007

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Nick LaRocca, leader of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB), would have been 100 years old April 11, 1989. He died in 1961, but a handful of New Orleanians dedicated to his immortalization as the creator of jazz often speak of him in present tense. This group ignited my interest in the subject, and made possible this birthday tribute to Nick LaRocca.

The individual who could best convince you that Nick lives on is his widow, **Ruth LaRocca**. Her blue eyes sparkle when she tells of being literally swept off her feet by a man known almost as well for his dancing as his trumpet playing. Musician and long-time friend Phil Zito has followed Nick's request to carve his rightful place in history and created the Nick LaRocca Original Dixieland Jazz Band Foundation. **Bruce Raeburn**, curator of Tulane University's jazz archive, is more objective and scholarly in his approach to Nick, but eagerly shares a wealth of knowledge and documentation on Nick's contributions to American musical and cultural history. **Adrian Victor**, at the music store "Werlein's For Music" knows the Nick LaRocca story by heart and provided a possible answer as to how Louisiana State University (LSU) acquired Nick's famous "Tiger Rag" as its fight song. Last, but not least, this article is dedicated to writer and historian **Mike Palao**, who, were it not for severe illness, would be offering his personal 100-year salute to Nick LaRocca on these pages.

The story of Nick LaRocca is the story of jazz music, as it was born, recorded, and spread throughout the world. On an even broader scale, it is the story of a changing cultural climate in this country. Turn of the century American was a reflection of Victorian English culture, and the dance music of the day was the waltz and the minuet. World War I sent many Americans to Europe and exposed them to other lifestyles and other types of music. America was on the verge of a reaction against polite forms—there was more experimentation in the arts, and the Roaring Twenties flappers were to personify a movement for women's rights. Nick LaRocca rode the crest of these changing times with his foot-stomping music and the uninhibited dances it inspired. Nick wrote a significant part of American music history when he took his jazz music from New Orleans and gave it to the world.

Dominic James "Nick" LaRocca was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on April 11, 1889. His parents were immigrants from Salaparuta, Sicily. His father Giarolamo was a shoemaker and amateur cornetist. Nick's siblings were all musical, but his father always discouraged this son's budding talents. Giarolamo proclaimed, "all musicians are bums" and insisted that Nick study to be a doctor.

The young Nick, nevertheless, enjoyed hearing his father play at parties and dances, and listened intently to the European musicians on the boats docked along the Mississippi. As he was exposed to the music of a dozen nationalities along the wharves, his interest in music grew. The creative young Nick began fashioning homemade musical instruments out of junk. He later began sneaking his father's cornet, practicing at a vacant house on Jackson Avenue, or hiding in the outhouse (then known as the "backhouse"). Nick reported that neighbors threw everything from food to bricks at him when he played. Undaunted, he

taught himself to play (Nick never learned to read music), and gave Giarolamo a surprise performance. His father smashed his own cornet, ending his own musical days in a vain attempt to thwart Nick's desire to play. The determined Nick saved his pennies for a secondhand cornet that met the same fate.

After Nick's fifteenth birthday, Giarolamo died and the rest is history. Finances dictated that he leave the prep school that was readying him for a medical career. A job as arc light attendant at the Old French Opera House brought him more exposure to music and money for a new cornet. As Nick loved parade band music, he practiced daily to a wind-up phonograph and **John Philip Sousa** music. From the old minstrel show musicians to parades, funerals, etc., Nick got his musical education on the streets of a city known for its music.

**“He started it all, Nick LaRocca with his Magazine Market pals before World War I
—originated jazz, which has echoed around the world.”
Thomas Ewing, *The New Orleans States*, March 2, 1937.**

Mike Palao points out that the proliferation of Europeans in New Orleans made for a proliferation of musical instruments. America was largely a land of wilderness at the turn of the century, and instruments were not always easy to acquire. Likewise, New Orleans was in the vanguard of culture at this time, with opera, art, and fashion emanating from Europe.

In 1905, Nick began playing in bands around New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, and, in 1908, he formed his first band. His clarinetist, **Larry Shields**, would become a member of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. They played for little or no money. Nick was a teetotaler, but was still content to play for drinks only. He worked as a tradesman by day, adept as a carpenter, plumber, and electrician. He met trombonist **Eddie Edwards**, another future Original Dixieland Jazz Band member, who treated Nick to vaudeville shows and got him into a military band. By 1914, Nick and Eddie were playing with "**Papa**" **Laine's** famous Reliance Band(s), a military marching band whose members changed according to who showed up to play.

In December of 1915, Nick was playing with a Papa Laine's band on the corner of Canal and Royal Streets advertising a prizefight between **Eddie Coulon** and New Orleans featherweight **Pete Herman**. **Harry James**, a Chicago club owner, heard Nick play and, after the fight, went to the Haymarket Café, where Nick was playing with **Johnny Stein's** band. He was so impressed with this music ---- unnamed but different from the ragtime of the day ---- that, from 1916 Chicago, he wired Nick a contract to play at his Booster's Club. LaRocca and Stein reorganized the band and went north, where Harry James provided the cold New Orleanians with secondhand overcoats. In this first encounter with the bitter Chicago winter, they also found the Booster's Club to have just been shut down by police. Harry James quickly secured an audition for the band at Schiller's Café. The audition alone drew a standing room only crowd, and secured a contract for the band at \$25 per week per man. The unsophisticated quintet neither realized that their pay meant near-starvation in Chicago, nor the phenomenon to come. Here the word "jass" ---- later to become "jazz" ---- was first applied to this new brand of dance music with syncopated marching band beat.

In 1916, Chicago, "jass" was literally and figuratively a four-letter word. It was a slang term that originated with the Chicago underworld, and usage broadened its original meaning

to apply to anything and everything. As the band played to Schiller's enthusiastic crowds, an inebriated vaudevillian shouted, "Jass it up, boys!" The shrewd Harry James saw history being written and hired the drunken retired entertainer to occupy a table and shout the now-famous line "... all drinks on the house." The band was immediately billed as Stein's Dixie Jass Band.

With Nick LaRocca as musical leader, the band continued to improve its two-beat style. If the crowd didn't know how to dance to it, Nick stepped off the stage and showed them. Nick composed "Livery Stable Blues" at this time, and the crowd went wild. They had never heard a cornet "whinny", a clarinet "crow", or a trombone "bray". This was the first time instruments were used to make animal sounds, and Nick composed and arranged "Tiger Rag", "Sensation Rag", and "Ostrich Walk". Schiller's was filled every night with crowds dancing till dawn, but the pittance of pay remained the same. Nick continued to emerge as a leader and convinced all but Stein to move on to higher-paying jobs. He even convinced a judge to let them out of the contract at Schiller's pleading that they neither could neither survive on the wages nor, if denied, the right to play elsewhere.

The Original Dixieland Jass Band was formed and went on to take Chicago by storm. The 1916 group consisted of Nick LaRocca on cornet, **Alcide Nunez** on clarinet (soon to be replaced by Larry Shields), **Henry Ragas** on piano, **Eddie Edwards** on trombone, and **Tony Sbarbaro** on drums. Shields and Sbarbaro are considered by many to have been the greatest Dixieland clarinetist and drummer respectively. Sbarbaro was the first drummer to use cowbells. Nick insisted on the best musicians and, when replacements were necessary, generally recruited out of his hometown of New Orleans. From the Hotel Normandy to Chicago 's Casino Gardens, the Original Dixieland Jass Band was a hit. Former members organized bands and played jazz in the city, but no one reached the heights of popularity as Nick LaRocca's group. ODJB (Original Dixieland Jazz Band) fans included **Will Rogers**, **Fanny Brice**, and **Al Jolson**, as well as members of Chicago's notorious underworld. (There are stories that a famous mobster once bought new overcoats for the band.)

The ODJB was not without its critics, though, as the Illinois Vigilance Association was not impressed. Women were spending their time in jazz clubs, smoking cigarettes, and performing "lewd" dances until dawn. The "fall of 1,000 girls" was traced to jazz music in Chicago alone! Even the New Orleans newspaper, *The Times-Picayune*, disavowed its city's musical sons, insisting that jazz was strictly the music of lower-class society.

**“In 1918, the ODJB played a benefit in New York and was given
equal billing with Enrico Caruso and Al Jolson.”
*The New York Telegram, May 19, 1937.***

The popularity of jazz was still in its infancy. The ODJB was Chicago 's number one musical attraction, but Broadway awaited them. Friend and fan Al Jolson lured to Chicago New York theatrical agent Max Hart, who immediately signed the band at the new Reisenweber Building. On January 17, 1917, they played the formal opening of Reisenweber's "400" Room. The crowd was at first stunned by this unfamiliar new beat, but, according to one account, the patrons, "after sniffing at it suspiciously like a cat with a saucer of strange food, suddenly decided that it was good and lapped it up". Nick, of course, showed the crowds how to dance, and the "400" Room rarely closed before 8 a.m. Soon, the band's salary was upped from a generous \$750 to an astounding \$1,000 per week. The

"sugar can" that had earlier collected pennies and nickels for a cheap meal in New Orleans was now stuffed with five, ten, and fifty dollars bills from wealthy patrons. The "dirty" word "jass" was evolving to "jazz" and "jaz". The new term was first used in *The New York Times* on February 2, 1917 advertising "The First Easter Appearance of the Famous Original Dixieland Jazz Band". Reisenweber's blazoned Columbus Circle with electric lights declaring "The Original Dixieland Band-Creators of Jazz." There are various accounts of the exact evolution of the term "jazz", but Nick insisted it grew from pranksters removing the "J" from signs for the "Jass" band!

**“Nick LaRocca’s “Tiger Rag” will be played and studied
when the world will have forgotten most of so called jazz writers”.**
Franklyn Frank, *The Chicago Times*, June 8, 1937.

The year was 1917. America was about to go to war, and Nick LaRocca was about to make recording history. "War jitters" and jazz music seemed to go hand in hand at this time. The phonograph, or talking machine, was establishing its place in American culture. The Columbia Gramophone Company had been recording operatic personalities since 1903. The Victor Talking Machine Company (later RCA Victor) emerged as the industry sales leader by 1917 with Enrico Caruso and John Philip Sousa recordings. Columbia was not to be outdone, and enlisted the aid of Broadway's latest explosion, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. Columbia was still to make a major historical blunder, as it neither understood the nature of Nick LaRocca's music nor how to record it. Despite the band's twelve original compositions, Columbia supplied them with material ("Darktown Strutters Ball" and "Indiana") to record. A studio accustomed to string quartets was not geared to Nick LaRocca's thunderous sounds. The recording was an acoustical disaster. The band was paid \$250 and ordered out, and the world's first jazz record was filed away.

Victor, with technical superiority in the primitive days of the recording industry, emerged victorious again. In a time of no microphones or amplifiers, Victor's sound engineers knew to place the musicians at various distances from the large "pickup horn" according to the strengths of their instruments to achieve proper balance. It was not easy for the ODJB to play together at these distances, but Victor successfully released the first jazz record. "Livery Stable Blues" (with its assorted animal sounds) and "Dixieland Jazz Band One-Step" were released on March 5, 1917 and sold for 75 cents. It sold over a million copies, topping Caruso and Sousa sales. Columbia quickly released the bad recording it had originally shelved. Temporary problems with Victor led to a contract with Aeolian, but, unfortunately, these recordings cannot be played on today's equipment. The ODJB returned to Victor in 1918, and their many successful recordings included "Tiger Rag," "Skeleton Jangle," "Fidgety Feet," "Ostrich Walk," and "Clarinet Marmalade," all original Nick LaRocca compositions.

**“The ODJB, New Orleans musicians
who made the world jazz-minded around 1917”.**
***The Tribune*, February 26 1937**

Columbia wanted a piece of this jazz record action, but could find no competition on Broadway for the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. It sent Ralph Peer, its Director of Artists and Repertoire, to New Orleans to find a jazz band. After three weeks, he wired back: "NO JAZZ BANDS IN NEW ORLEANS". Columbia finally found a jazz band in late 1919.

The Original Dixieland Jazz Band continued to take Reisenweber's by storm and played Sunday night concerts at the Winter Garden with **Fred Astaire** and **Ed Wynn**. Al Jolson hired them for private parties on Long Island. Europe was next, but not before a couple of setbacks. Trombonist Eddie Edwards was drafted, **Emile Christian** was recruited from New Orleans, Pianist Henry Ragas died, and **J. Russel Robinson** replaced him. The Original Dixieland Jazz Band was signed to play the London Hippodrome beginning March 2, 1919, at the American equivalent of \$1,056 per week.

“Tiger Rag’ is the jazz musician’s anthem”.
Bob Godley, *The Times-Picayune*, March 2, 1937

Harry O. Brunn, author of *The Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band*, called this "the number that had stunned the audience at Reisenweber's in 1917, horrified the British reserve in 1919, and gone on to become the national anthem of the jazz musician." Nick LaRocca drew from "London Bridge" and the "National Emblem March" to create "Tiger Rag", but the roar of a tiger executed on trombone had never before been heard. Esso (now Exxon) used "Tiger Rag" in its "Put a tiger in your tank" ad campaign of the sixties. It has been the fight song of Louisiana State University (LSU) since the days of Huey Long. Governor Long reportedly heard Castro Carazzo playing Dixieland jazz at the Roosevelt Hotel (now the Fairmont). He made Carazzo band director of LSU, and "Tiger Rag" became part of its repertoire. The first few notes of "Tiger Rag" have been immortalized on the screen door of the LaRocca home. "Tiger Rag" was first released by Aeolian Records in 1917 and Victor in 1918.

**“The ODJB played the Peace Ball in London, England.
King George V, General Pershing, Marshals Foch and Pétain
and other dignitaries were in attendance”.**
Robert Johnson, *The Memphis Press Scimitar*, 1919.

London was an instant success. The Hippodrome's comedy star could not outshine his jazzy competition and insisted they be released. Nick LaRocca and his band then played the London Palladium, as well as Glasgow, Scotland, to SRO crowds. When they played London's Martan Club, it changed its name to the Dixie Club. Opening night at the *Palais de Dance* boasted 5,800 paid admissions. Lord Donegall, an ardent fan, arranged a command performance for King George V. They were the hit of the Victory Ball, celebrating the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, attended by France's Marshals Foch and Petain, American General Pershing, and all the crown heads of Europe.

In 1920, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band returned to New York performances. At the *Follies Bèrgère*, Gilda Gray shimmied on the same stage. (After Gilda went on to fame with her outrageous new dance, Nick would step off the stage and do his own brand of shimmy.) They played Atlantic City with Sophie Tucker and toured Pennsylvania at \$2,400 per night, billed as the "Creators of Jazz".

In 1921, clarinetist Larry Shields got homesick and left. The ODJB was still playing Broadway, but for less money. Former band members organized a band called the Memphis Five, and fostered greats like **Jimmy Durante** and **Tommy Dorsey**. Nick LaRocca's band survived with the advent of “the Charleston”, but symphonic jazz was taking over New

York.

The postwar years brought a strong anti-jazz movement. The 1922 Cotillo Bill outlawed dancing after midnight on Broadway, meaning shorter hours and less pay for musicians. Vigilante societies and lawmakers outlawed the shimmy and banished jazz from all respectable places of entertainment. Victor would not record more jazz. Musicians who could read music went on to orchestras. The Original Dixieland Jazz Band (of whom four out of five did not read music) played for a while in Harlem, where the anti-jazz laws were not enforced. Internal problems with the band led to its ultimate demise. In 1925, a heartbroken Nick LaRocca left behind his fire-engine-red Stutz Bearcat, and drove his Buick home to New Orleans.

For over a decade, Nick LaRocca worked as a building contractor in New Orleans, and music bearing his influence flourished in New York. He did not think about music or play the radio during this time. He refused an offer to reorganize the band for a music spectacular to be called "The Big Broadcast of 1937". This apparently rekindled the flame, though, and Nick turned on the radio. When he heard a swing band playing his "licks", he decided to prove to a new generation that swing music was just old jazz in new clothes.

Nick found Larry Shields in New Orleans—he had also not played in ten years. After building up their confidence on the Absinthe House stage, they returned to New York to round up Edwards, Robinson, and Sbarbaro. After three weeks of practice, the William Morris Agency signed them up for Ed Wynn's weekly radio broadcast on the NBC Red Network. They closed with Nick's "Tiger Rag" attracting more listeners than guest stars on fourteen previous programs, at \$750 for ten minutes work. Offers once again came from all over the world for the Original Dixieland Jazz Band.

Nick LaRocca recognized the advent of the Swing Age and realized the band had to be bigger. The new "Original" Dixieland Jazz band recorded for Victor in 1936 with fourteen men, using the same orchestrations as the Goodman and Dorsey bands. The "Original Dixieland Five" stuck together, however, and made three recordings under this name. The 1936 recordings display superior technical clarity, and the slower tempo reflects the influence of Swing. It was often noted that the original five musicians could make as much noise as any fourteen-piece Swing band. Nick attributed this to the non-amplified conditions in the early recording studios, when each man had to blow as hard as he possibly could!

**"If 'Tiger Rag' is a musician's piece, the Dixieland Band is the musician's 'Beau ideal'."
Bob Godley, Times Picayune, March 2, 1937.**

The band subsequently appeared on Benny Goodman's weekly radio broadcast, and the "King of Swing" acknowledged his influence at an early age from the ODJB. With Nick serving as his own booking agent, the band played many radio programs, including Tommy Dorsey's Radio Show and the Cavalcade of America. The year 1937 brought a vaudeville tour with Ken Murray's appearance in the "March of Time" film documentary, and acclaim in a *Saturday Evening Post* article entitled "From Ragtime to Swing".

Nick and the band returned to a hero's welcome in New Orleans and played the St. Charles Theatre. At a banquet in their honor, the president of the St. Charles Theatre Corporation expressed hope that New Orleanians would "forget their past efforts to disclaim

the parenthood of jazz and welcome the band back home in proper spirit." The musicians continued to tour until 1938, when internal conflict again forced Nick to disband the group and return to New Orleans.

Nick refused offers in the 1940s to reorganized and play, although Dixieland jazz was in its heyday. Many feel that the ODJB could have made its mark in history at this time, with the popularity of jazz and the specialization of phonograph recording. Instead, Nick launched a campaign to answer to any attempts to discredit him as the creator of jazz. (This effort continues today through friend Phil Zito.) He resumed his contracting business, and he and wife Ruth raised a family in the Constance Street home he built. Heart problems forced him to put away the trumpet, but he continued to pick out songs on the piano. Until his death in 1961, Nick composed and published songs with friend Joe Mares.

"The ODJB was first to play jazz music at Reisenweber's famous New York Café at a salary of—\$1,500 per month".
The Chicago Daily News, 1917.

In the 1960 book, *The Story of The Original Dixieland Jazz Band*, H. O. Brunn ends the Nick LaRocca story thusly:

"The rhythmic ideas, phrases, and tonal effects developed by Nick LaRocca nearly a half century ago are likely to remain fundamental to jazz for many years to come, regardless of its modern directions. But his impact upon American music may not be fully appreciated until jazz is more fully understood by more people."

"As jazz goes into the fifth decade of its history, the fashions in that contagious form of syncopation continue to change. On through the pages of history march its heroes—Paul Whiteman, Benny Goodman, Louis Armstrong, and Dizzy Gillespie—each hailed in his own day. But lingering like ghosts in the background—first ridiculed, then widely acclaimed, later attacked, and finally all but forgotten—are Nick LaRocca and his musicians of another age, the five pioneers who brought into existence the most phenomenal revolution in the annals of American music."

"Nick LaRocca, after almost a quarter of a century, is still considered to be one of the of the finest trumpet players in the world."
The Baltimore Sun, January 18, 1937.

Seventy-year-old Ruth LaRocca lives quietly in the home Nick built with the "Tiger Rag" musical notes on the door. Her seven children (one from a first marriage, six with Nick) all live in the area. Son James is a musician; Nick taught him by ear, but he learned to read music. Ruth met Nick in his final days of touring. She was a seventeen-year-old waitress, and was introduced to forty-seven-old Nick on the Capital Boat one Sunday afternoon. She says Nick danced like Fred Astaire and gave him all her dances. Ruth remembers Nick more as a carpenter than a musician, and a left-handed one at that.

The Nick LaRocca legacy has brought Ruth many friends. She has a hardcover copy of a German book titled *Nick LaRocca: Ein Portrait*. Its author, Horst Lange, plays "Tiger Rag" on his radio show in Berlin and dedicates it to her. She mentions other friends in Europe, explaining that Nick's music was more popular across the Atlantic, there having been no anti-jazz crusades. She recalls being an honoree at tributes to Nick, many organized by friend Phil Zito, such as luncheons with author Harry O. Brunn, baseball player Zeke

Bonuram, and Jimmy Durante. Ruth remembers the 1976 St. Joseph's Day parade that was dedicated to Nick, complete with Nick LaRocca doubloons. Ruth, a Thibodaux, Louisiana native, is as energetic as she is attractive. She and Nick danced to Phil Zito's band at the Lions Club, and she still dances to Phil's music at Original Dixieland Jazz Band Foundation dances. She likes to dance to "jazzed up" music, "the way Nick played it", and can still keep up with "Tiger Rag". From the drawers and cabinets stuffed with Nick LaRocca memorabilia, Ruth pulls out sheet music Nick composed and published in his later years. Her favorite, of course, is "Give Me That Love", which Nick composed for her. He simply called it "Ruthie".

Just a few streets away live musician Phil Zito and his vivacious wife, Barbara. If anyone works to promote the story of Nick LaRocca, it is this long-time friend. Phil, a drummer, started playing the music of Nick LaRocca around 1929. When Nick returned to New Orleans, he and Phil formed the Nick LaRocca and Phil Zito Jazz Club. Nick expressed to Phil that he had been overlooked in his contribution to musical history, and asked the younger Phil to help establish him as the creator of jazz. Shortly after Nick's death, Phil and friends secured a state charter and created a non-profit corporation—the Nick LaRocca Original Dixieland Jazz Band Foundation.

Seventy-five-year-old Phil still plays music after three heart attacks and two strokes, and his energy for his Nick LaRocca projects is unflagging. He recites Nick LaRocca "firsts": first to play jazz, first to record jazz, first to play jazz in Chicago, in New York, in Europe...first to play jazz before royalty, first to make animal sounds with instruments. He knows the entire Nick LaRocca story, and provides documentation to prove his points. Among his collection of Nick LaRocca memorabilia is a copy of the Guinness Book of World Records, and he has marked the page stating that Nick LaRocca and the ODJB made the earliest jazz record and released the first jazz record in 1917.

Nick LaRocca made the first major donation to Tulane University's William Ranson Hogan Jazz Archive. The LaRocca collection—containing 2,844 items, including photos, correspondence, scrapbooks, interview material, advertisements, film, phonograph records, posters, contracts, and affidavits—is located in the Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Jazz Archives.

The American Italian Renaissance Foundation Museum and Library houses early photos and additional information on Nick LaRocca and the Original Dixieland Jazz Band.

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