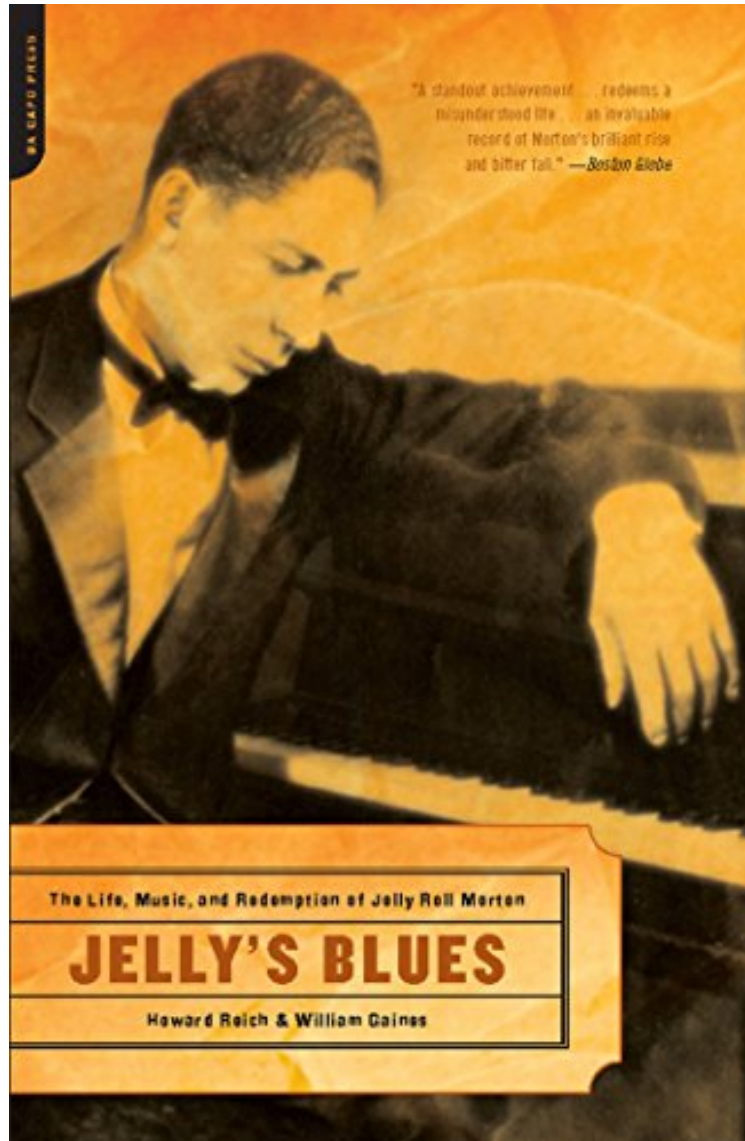


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## Jelly's Blues: The Life, Music, and Redemption of Jelly Roll Morton

*Howard Reich, William M. Gaines*

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### Howard Reich, William M. Gaines : Jelly's Blues: The Life, Music, and Redemption of Jelly Roll Morton

before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Jelly's Blues: The Life, Music, and Redemption of Jelly Roll Morton:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Justice for Jelly at last By William E. Clark This biography corrects the widely-held impression that Jelly was a jerk. Certainly his early years were not played according to Hoyle, but he more than repaid that karmic debt with the dues that were extracted by the music industry, specifically the Melrose brothers and ASCAP. The previously written "Mr. Jelly Roll" by Alan Lomax and many disparaging remarks by the

great Duke Ellington have tended to paint an ugly picture of Jelly's life and character. Learning that Lomax did not compensate Jelly for the Library of Congress sessions and that the Duke was a beneficiary of Jelly's crusade against ASCAP puts quite a different spin on this great American artist.<sup>21</sup> of 21 people found the following review helpful.

Chapters Six through Eight Make This Book By madamemusico

The great trumpeter Rafael Mendez once said that he lived by one golden rule his father taught him: "Never boast. Someone better than you may be lurking around the corner, waiting to take your place." This was a lesson that Jelly Roll Morton (1886-1941) didn't learn until bad luck, lack of opportunity and rivals who DID take his place (particularly Ellington and Art Tatum) humbled him into reassessing his talent and his place in contemporary music. But, as this remarkable book points out, he not only learned his lessons but learned from them, remaking both his image and his music in the face of near-total indifference.

When reading through this bio, I had reached about page 148 and had some reservations as to its worth over Alan Lomax's half-bio, half-autobiography, "Mister Jelly Lord." It seemed to me that the authors had bent over backward to excuse Morton's past as a pimp, gambler and hustler simply because he was the first to codify jazz in written music, and indeed even seemed to claim his superiority as a jazz musician over such luminaries as Bunk Johnson, Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet. Chapter Five, in particular, had several errors in both fact and judgment, consistently referring to Morton making his early acoustic recordings in front of "microphones" (they used a big metal horn to focus the sound into a steel cutting needle, no microphones were used at all, hence the term "acoustic"), renaming Bing Crosby as Bill (a typo so glaring that even a modern yuppie proofreader should have spotted it), and their astounding demotion of the New Orleans Rhythm Kings to "a rinky-dink ensemble" in their records without Morton. (In plain truth, the NORK was the first band to actually swing on records, even from their very first records in 1922, by virtue of their rolling, "loping" beat, similar in feel to that of Sidney Bechet's New Orleans Feetwarmers of a decade later. Listen and hear for yourself.)

At this point, then, I was going to give this book 3 stars, mostly for factual accuracy but not for value judgments or style. But then something happened. They began chronicling, in full detail, the meeting and eventual partnership of Morton and Roy Carew. They fully documented, as Lomax had not, all of Morton's personal, medical and legal battles with their results in his lifetime and after. They described in full Morton's second and last stay in New York, quoted what he really said to black musicians on the street corners of Harlem, and told just how he re-evaluated the musical value of contemporary musicians and planned to compete with them. And they described in detail his sad last months in California and the creative new music he had written for large orchestra, something far beyond his greatest accomplishments of the 1920s.

Morton, then, is truly given his just due as a man and musician. The loudmouthed "braggart" is revealed as a man who did not proselytize his music above all others in Harlem, but warned younger black musicians not to trust the powers that be in the music business of their time because they would get railroaded as he had. The quixotic dreamer who Lomax described as wanting to create carbon-copy Red Hot Peppers bands across America to push his name above all others is shown as a man who truly cared about finding work in the Depression for good musicians who deserved better. And the "moldy fig" whose stomps and blues were already outdated by 1939 is shown as a vital creator who was still coming up with startling new material. So much is already evident to Morton fans from a few of the 1939-40 General recordings, but this book also describes his innovative large-band scores "Mr. Joe," "Oh Baby" (not to be confused with the pop '20s song of the same name), "Why?" and especially "Ganjam." More satisfyingly for the reader, it chronicles how Morton's "loudmouthed" complaints of the early 1940s eventually led to real reform in the 1950s and '60s of the entire music business and the rules it had to follow.

As a result, I cannot recommend this book highly enough. Forget the sometimes stiff and schoolbookish writing style. Forget the occasional errors in fact and judgment. The overall picture it paints of Mr. Jelly Lord, especially in his last years, is a fine and noble one. If you think you know the Morton story, I'm here to tell you you DON'T, at least not until you read this book. I always had the utmost respect for Morton's musical mind, one of those rare organs that was able to remember with photographic precision everything it heard and synthesize it into a unique and personal style. Now I have respect for Morton the person as well, at least the Morton of his last years. Jelly Roll had indeed redeemed himself, and you WILL be startled by some of the things you read here. I guarantee it.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Berlin, Gershwin and How ASCAP held African-American musicians hostage. By Tony Steve

This book gives insight to a pioneer in jazz. Morton claims he invented jazz, maybe he did, maybe he didn't, but he was at the front of the road to jazz. That ASCAP would deny him his rightful reward is a travesty. As a member ASCAP it is embarrassing to read that our founders were racist and behaved no better than the 1% towards other artists. Regarding Melrose Publishers that swindled Morton, shame, shame and shame. He was, as Reich and Gaines posit, Morton was the Cassius Clay of his art and day. More Jelly, please.

Jelly's Blues recounts the tumultuous life of Jelly Roll Morton (ca., 1885-1941). A virtuoso pianist with a larger-than-life personality, he composed such influential early jazz pieces as "King Porter Stomp" and "New Orleans Blues." However, by the late 1930s, he was nearly forgotten. In 1992, the death of an eccentric memorabilia collector led to the unearthing of a startling archive, revealing Morton to be a much more complex and passionate man than many realized. An especially immediate and visceral look into the jazz worlds of New Orleans and Chicago, Jelly's Blues is a definitive biography, a long overdue look at one of the twentieth century's most important composers.

From Publishers Weekly There has been a resurgence of interest in Jelly Roll Morton (1890- 1941) in recent years, much of it highlighting the unattractive characteristics of the legendary Creole jazz pianist, composer and bandleader, such as his flashy clothes, diamond-studded tooth, boastfulness and denial of his race. In their sympathetic biography, Reich, jazz critic of the Chicago Tribune, and Gaines, an investigative reporter who retired from the Chicago Tribune in 2001, play down these aspects of Morton's personality and concentrate on his musicianship, keyboard virtuosity, innovative compositions and ingenuity in devising a way to set improvisational music down on paper. The authors also highlight the redemptive qualities of Morton's last years, basing their discussion on letters, documents and scores from the voluminous archive of Morton material in the collection of New Orleans jazz historian William Russell that became available after Russell's death in 1992. They show that at the end of his life Morton composed revolutionary new works, though he couldn't get anyone to play or record them. At the same time, he kept up a running battle with his publishers, who had exploited him for years, and launched a crusade against ASCAP (the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers), which collected royalties for composers and robbed black songwriters of what was due them by denying them membership. Morton's correspondence with the Justice Department concerning his case against ASCAP and his music publishers is included in the book (though not seen by PW), as an annotated discography. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Booklist Thanks to music educator William Russell's 65,000-item collection relating to the musician with whom he was obsessed, Reich and Gaines finally sift reality from hype about Jelly Roll Morton (1885?-1941). They demonstrate that Morton's long-derided claim to have invented jazz holds a lot of water. By 1905, Morton had formulated pieces that remain in the jazz repertoire, and he published the standards "Jelly Roll Blues" and "Frog-I-More Rag" while World War I raged. Meanwhile he extended his performing arena from New Orleans-Biloxi-Mobile to Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. Flush in 1923, he recorded the first great jazz piano solos and, in 1926, with his carefully picked Red Hot Peppers, the best pre-swing jazz-group recordings. Cheated unto destitution by white publishers, and gravely ill at the last, Morton continued writing, producing big band charts that anticipated 1950s innovations, and battling music-industry exploitation of black artists. Despite much poor wording and some grammatical groaners, this is a revisionist milestone in jazz studies, a book on which more than just future Morton biographies will depend. Ray Olson Copyright copy; American Library Association. All rights reserved "A standout achievement...redeems a misunderstood life...an invaluable record of Morton's brilliant rise and bitter fall."