

Why Jazz?

--For Jazz Fest, Saturday, June 14, 2025

Because in 1819, African players of calabash
drums and guitars in New Orleans proved
that no thief could steal their rightful music.
Why jazz? Because from the blues, ragtime,
marches, and spirituals, burst forth a new
sliding, smooth and staccato kind of magic.
Because syncopated cross-rhythms were brewing
even in the states where they were banned—
a glowing breath no one could extinguish.
Because the Crescent City was fertile soil
for a tree of music whose branches still sprout
more than two-hundred years later.
Because the twice-daily ferry between Havana
and New Orleans united the tresillo and the backbeat.
Because marching band brass, drums, and reeds
were still straining with potential.
Because Storyville was too small to hold the swing
notes of Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong.
Because speakeasies served something stronger
than whiskey and much more intoxicating.
Because musicians found something that could be
sweet or hot or free or cool.
Because Bessie Smith didn't become Empress
of the Blues by hiding her pride.
Because the Harlem Hellfighters fought on the front line
and played music behind it.
Because Paris never shone so brightly
as when Black American jazz stars first graced its stages.
Because the International Sweethearts of Rhythm
found their swing in their diversity.
Because Duke Ellington's composition was rivaled
only by his leadership and impeccable grace.
Because he knew the tonal soul of every player.
Because Mary Lou Williams was barely a teenager
when she played piano with Duke's Washingtonians
and made it "through muck and mud"¹
to go on and mentor the legends.
Because nothing mattered at the Savoy Ballroom
except whether you could dance.
Because Billie Holiday could tell you
the whole universe with two notes²
Because Ella Fitzgerald went from Virginia

to First Lady of Song.
Because Thelonious Monk didn't listen to the haters
but they couldn't help but listen to his genius.
Because Monk was right when he said the piano
has no "wrong notes"³
Because no genre could contain Miles Davis,
who could hear and play the future.⁴
Because Coltrane knew A Love Supreme
and gave us permission to keep going back
to our very Favorite Things.
Because Coltrane taught us jazz lives
on both sides of heaven.
Because the High Priestess of Soul came to us
in the form of Nina Simone, who still leads
us in the fight for justice and equal rights.
Why jazz? Because wherever there is joy
and sorrow, wherever there is resistance
and love, wherever there is invention,
there will always, always
be jazz.

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City of Alexandria Poet Laureate