

# The Sound of St. Louis

A unique music culture claims its roots in the city of St. Louis

**By Alzhraa Mahmoud & Celina Zhou**

*In-Depth Editors*

**By Adela Gingrich**

*Staff*

*Illustration by Loukya Gillella*

*Photo by Vincent Hsiao*

St. Louis is a city known for many things: gooey butter cake, the Cardinals, the Arch — and well, did the Arch get mentioned already? While most wouldn't consider St. Louis a music mecca, especially when compared to cities like New York, the birthplace of hip-hop and punk, or Bristol, Tenn. where country music was originally conceived, St. Louis has been quietly shaping American music for over a century, specifically jazz. From its early roots in ragtime and blues to its role in the development of modern jazz, the city's musicians, students and educators continue to contribute to a vibrant and evolving sound that's distinctly St. Louis.

## History

St. Louis has made its mark as one of the most culturally diverse cities in American history. By the 19th century, waves of immigration swept into St. Louis, containing European ethnic groups seeking prosperity in the Midwest. With the turn of the 20th century, the Great Migration brought millions of African Americans to St.

Louis and other Midwestern cities. These migration patterns and blending of different racial and ethnic groups turned St. Louis into a melting pot of various cultures and traditions, specifically in music.

"St. Louis is a bit of a crossroads, culturally and therefore musically," social studies teacher Zachary Garrison said. "St. Louis has a mix of Delta Blues from Louisiana and Mississippi; it also has a mix of European traditional folk plays out of Appalachia; also a pretty solid immigrant base in the 19th century of German, Jewish, Irish and Italian groups that have brought their own style. So in that way, St. Louis has a unique blend of cultures and traditions."

The city's diverse population provided it with its own rich musical journey across decades of history. Dating all the way back to the beginning of the 20th century, St. Louis emerged as a pivotal center of ragtime and blues. These styles of music were deeply rooted in African American folk music and were precursors to jazz. As the roaring twenties brought forth the jazz era, St. Louis became a

hub for artists to foster talent in local riverboats, or steamboats on the water which showcased local jazz artists.

**"During the Great Migration, folks came to St. Louis and they would perform on river boats. They were a chance for new artists to showcase themselves."**

**David Forbes**  
*Social studies teacher*

St. Louis' musical history was largely influenced by the work of Black artists, who blended their culture into American music and gave birth to genres like ragtime and blues. Not only did they transform the national music industry, but they broke existing racial barriers and fostered their own cultural identity through music.

"If you're a musician in the 1910s and '20s, the expectation

## JAZZ GENRES

**Bossa nova**, meaning "new wave" in Portuguese, is a Brazilian music genre from the 1950s to 1960s blending samba and jazz.

**Swing** is a type of jazz from the 1930s characterized by danceable rhythms and a feeling of forward momentum.

**Blues** is a music genre from the 1860s, known for its melancholic themes, a 12-bar form and African musical traditions.

is that you're going to play a certain style of music," Garrison said. "But if you're a Black musician, you have this freedom to say, 'Well, we don't have to play white-style music because we're not even really allowed in white spaces, so we're going to create our own take on music that allows us to escape.'"

Despite their huge success in the music industry, Black artists still faced challenges that limited their opportunities in music, such as segregation and discrimination. Even to this day, while there are many Black musicians that can be found in the history books, many still don't receive the credit and honor for their roles in the music industry.

"I think of Big Mama Thorton as one of the forgotten pioneers in rock and roll," Forbes said. "She did her rendition of Hound Dog before Elvis did. She had a single of it; but nobody knows anything about her. That's the case for a lot of Black artists as they succeed within go through and their own circles. They're pioneers in pushing music forward, but they're often discriminated against."



**FAR LEFT:** Bassist Bob Deboo opens up the Wednesday night Jazz jam in The Dark Room at The Grandel. Deboo began the night playing standards with the house band before opening up the stage to any players wanting to participate. "We're always here every Wednesday. [Everyone] is always welcome back," Deboo said.

**LEFT:** Benny Benack plays the tune, "Speak Low." He stopped by St. Louis for a bit while on tour. "Half the tunes I learned, I learned in jazz jams," Benack said. (Photo by Vincent Hsiao)

SPREAD DESIGN BY GRACE KWEON & LOUKYA GILLELLA