



Cultural, Social and Historical Contexts of New Orleans Music

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**"Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts
of
New Orleans Music"**

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New Orleans embodies the rich mix of African and European cultures that have shaped the American South so deeply. During the Colonial Period the region's European and African populations were concentrated in urban areas of which New Orleans was and continues to be the most important. Under Spanish, French, British, and American flags the city has maintained a vital, independent spirit that distinguishes her from other cities in the region.

New Orleans can be viewed as a crossroads or meeting ground for Caribbean islands and the mainland South, for Afro-American and Euro-American cultures, for Protestant and Catholic, and for Christian and Voodoo religions. As the waters of Mississippi flow by New Orleans and deposit rich alluvial soil brought suspended over hundreds of miles, so, too, have waves of European and African peoples brought a rich and varied culture to the city. Their mix gives the mystery, the magic of veiled worlds that will never be fully seen, understood, or explained. The river and this extraordinary union of black and white cultures are central to the persona of New Orleans. Nowhere else do we find such a mix of black and white worlds in every aspect of life -from music to architecture to food. Nowhere else do we find the historic and continuing movement of culture -into the city from Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean, and out of the city upriver to Memphis, St. Louis, and Chicago.

Scholars often divide the American South into "Upland" and "Lowland" areas which are synonymous with the Appalachian chain and the rich lowland plantation belt. New Orleans stands apart from these worlds; on their cusp, it bridges the American South and the Caribbean. Her Catholic and voodoo cultures move New Orleans closer to French and Haitian experiences than to the classic southern tradition.

In a region that is distinctly "different" from the rest of our nation, New Orleans stands apart from the region that surrounds her. Rural and urban worlds upriver feed on her cultural traditions for their own. From Native American travelers, to Mark Twain, to tourists on the Delta Queen we see a consensus that New Orleans is where a trip should either begin or end. It is both starting point and conclusion of journeys. To understand New Orleans we must understand her region and its complex worlds of race, class, and gender.

Like Twain's Huck and Jim floating on their raft in the Mississippi, black and white cultures are inextricably linked in New Orleans. Race permeates every aspect of the city's experience. New Orleans history, politics and music are all shaped by the respective contributions of her white and black citizens and by the third world of her "gens de colour".

Class also offers a telling perspective on New Orleans history. An educated white and Black elite parallels white and black working class worlds, and together they produced a fascinating heritage. Writers such as George Washington Cable, William Faulkner, and Ishmael Reed have been drawn to the city. Their literary

portraits of New Orleans are complemented by an extensive body of black and White classical music, composers, and performers. It was the first southern city to establish an opera company, and as early as 1877, a black symphony orchestra organized by Louis Martin played concerts for the public.

Working class black and white communities shaped an equally rich body of folktales and music for which New Orleans has become internationally known. For many years black music and dance were performed on Congo Square where African instruments, music, and dance flourished. George Washington Cable vividly describes "a dance of multitude, a sort of vehement cotillion. The contortions of the encircling crowd were strange and terrible. The din was hideous".¹ Among the dances performed with an African beat was the bamboula which inspired New Orleans-born composer Louis Gottshalk in his music.

Elite and working class architecture also offer interesting comparisons in New Orleans. As in other areas of the South, columned Georgian mansions symbolized the power and wealth of white and black families. Both white and black slaveholding families built and occupied such imposing structures.

Working class homes, in contrast, were much simpler, functional dwellings. The most famous of these housetypes, the shotgun home, has been traced to Afro-Caribbean and African sources². New Orleans examples of the shotgun home range from very simple dwellings to elaborate, beautifully designed homes. The basic shotgun design of three rooms in a line is frequently modified with a second story on the rear which redefines the home as a "camelback".

Finally, class differences are clearly seen in New Orleans art. While wealthy black and white families commissioned family portraits for the walls of their homes, folk artists developed paintings, sculpture, and quilts that offered colorful, dramatic images for homes in their community. At times folk art merged with religion and music, as in the work of Sister Gertrude Morgan, a gospel street singer who painted canvases and decorated her longplaying record albums with religious scenes.

Gender is a third and equally important perspective in understanding New Orleans culture. W.J. Cash argued that wealthy white women in the South were placed on a pedestal by southern white males. Elite white female worlds in New Orleans included the Colonial Dames, the Junior League, the *Petit Salon*, and the Orleans Club.

In the face of these segregated white women's institutions, black women campaigned for equal rights. In 1871 Frances E. W. Harper, a black poet, issued "a spirited defense of women's rights". She and other black women argued that if an oppressed race could rise, women could also³.

Within the voodoo religion, gender was also important. The famed king and queen of voodoo, "Dr. John" and Marie Laveau, exerted enormous power over both black and white followers. A New Orleans newspaper described a ceremony in the 1850's which was raided by police:

Blacks and whites were circling around promiscuously, writhing in muscular contractions, panting, raving, and frothing at the mouth. But the most degrading and infamous feature of this scene was the presence of a very large number of ladies (?) moving in the highest walks of society, rich and hitherto supposed respectable, that were caught in the dragnet.⁴

The Marie Laveaus —mother and daughter— symbolized important powers which women assumed as religious figures.

This role can be seen in twentieth century figures such as Sister Gertrude Morgan who used her religion, music, and art to heal the sick.

Albert Raboteau suggests that through both voodoo and Christian ceremonies women often controlled the application of spiritual power. While male ministers presented the word of God from their pulpit, women used spiritual power to heal -often in private homes or in the street. Their voodoo power emerges during ceremonies which use drumming, singing, and spirit possession to invoke Le Grand Zombi or Damballah, the snake god, for their power⁵.

Zora Neale Hurston was initiated into a New Orleans voodoo cult by a priest named Turner. She stressed that many of his regular clients were from prominent white families⁶.

Many other healers in outlying areas view New Orleans as the "source" of their power. In "Hootchie Kootchie Man" Muddy Waters appropriately declares "I'm going to New Orleans, get me a Mo Jo Hand./ Gonner show all you women how to treat a good man."⁷

With its complex worlds of race, class, and gender, New Orleans is viewed from outside as a world of mystery, as that "other" South. Faulkner's Charles Bon in *Absalom, Absalom!* travels from New Orleans to the university which is located in the writer's mythic world of Jefferson in Yoknapatawpha County. Bon is distinguished from other Mississippi students at that "small new provincial college" by his "slightly Frenchified cloak and hat" and by the "flowered, almost feminized gown" he wore⁸.

Faulkner himself had lived in New Orleans with Sherwood Anderson who urged him to return to his home in Oxford and write about the worlds he knew best⁹. For Faulkner and for many other Southerners New Orleans represented the region's "Left Bank", a Catholic city that embraced, understood, and appreciated a variety of lifestyles that were unwelcome in the Protestant hinterlands.

This division between Catholic New Orleans and the rural Protestant South is important. Catholic cultures have traditionally been more tolerant and accepting of other traditions than have been Protestant worlds. This is evident in the coexistence of voodoo and Catholicism in New Orleans for so many years. The Catholic bishop and voodoo priestess Marie Laveau symbolized the respective religious hierarchies of Western Europe and West Africa.

This cultural diversity is at least a partial explanation for the extraordinarily rich and varied musical legacy of New Orleans. The Crescent City is indeed the "Cradle of Jazz" as a recent book by Jason Berry, Jonathon Foose and Tad Jones suggests¹⁰. New Orleans sheltered and in its way nurtured both African and European musical traditions. A symbiotic relationship developed in which classical European musical styles and instruments merged with African rhythms and dances to create America's true classical music -jazz. Many of its finest performers -like Jelly Roll Morton- were classically trained musicians who were forced by Jim Crow laws to adapt their musical styles for performances at night clubs in Storyville. These artists merged classical urban strains with rural blues to create a distinctive new musical heritage¹¹.

While the popular ear associates New Orleans music with Dixieland jazz and Louis Armstrong, the city has continued to produce an uninterrupted line of outstanding musicians who have had a major impact on American music. The flow of music upriver from the city remains unabated today, and scholars are increasingly drawn to its study.

Robert Palmer points out that when Alan Freed began calling rhythm and blues music "rock and roll" on Cleveland, Ohio's radio station WJW in 1951, he was discovering a music which had deep roots in New Orleans. Almost all the producers and songwriters who made rock and roll records in New Orleans during the 50's were black¹².

Fats Domino, the most popular of all New Orleans rock and roll figures, first recorded in 1949. Working closely with his producer, arranger, and musical mastermind, Dave Bartholomew, Domino was an early master of what Palmer calls "fusion" music. His drummer, Charles "Hungry" Williams drew on both Tin Pan Alley and "second line" rhythms associated with New Orleans parade bands. New Orleans rock and roll musicians, Palmer argues, drew on a mix of classic European, country music, African and Afro-Caribbean rhythms for its sounds¹³.

The recent study by Jason Berry, Jonathon Foose and Tad Jones, *Up From the Cradle of Jazz - New Orleans Music Since World War II*, offers a rare insight into New Orleans neighborhoods and families central to the evolution of the city's music. Through a series of sensitive interviews with musicians, the authors reveal a musical genealogy and an inside view of how each generation of New Orleans musicians reshape the traditions of family and neighborhood.

Beginning with the "Flush Years" of New Orleans rhythm and blues, the authors trace extraordinary musical families such as the Marsalises: Ellis, Brandford, Wynton, and Jason. Neighborhoods and their musical personalities include Willie Tee, the Wild Magnolias, the Neville Brothers, and Big Chief Jolly's Wild Tchoupitoulas¹⁴.

It is clear that New Orleans music is alive and well. Music is as familiar to the city as are beignets and chicory coffee. Its musical and cultural legacy enrichens both our nation and the world.

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- 1 - John Blassingame, *Black New Orleans* (Chicago: 1973), p.3.
 - 2 - John Vlach, "The Shotgun House: An African Architectural Legacy", in *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts*, William Ferris, ed. (Jackson: 1983), pp.275-296.
 - 3 - John Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, p.89.
 - 4 - John Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, p.6.
 - 5 - Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (New York: 1978), pp.75-80. See also Raymond J. Marinez, *Mysterious Marie Laveau: Voodoo Queen* (New Orleans: 1956).

- 6 - Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: 1970), pp.239-242.
- 7 - For a discussion of voodoo and blues see William Ferris, *Blues From the Delta* (New York: 1984), pp.77-78.
- 8 - William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: 1936), p.95.
- 9 - William Faulkner, "A note on Sherwood Anderson", in *Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters*, ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: 1965), p.8.
- 10 - Jason Berry, Jonathon Foose, and Tad Jones, *Up From the Cradle of Jazz -New Orleans Music Since World War II* (Athens, Ga: 1986).
- 11 - Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll* (New York: 1950), pp.27-38.
- 12 - Robert Palmer, "Folk, Popular, Jazz, and Classical Elements in New Orleans", in *Folk Music and Modern Sound*, William Ferris and Mary L. Hart, ed. (Jackson: 1982), pp.194-195.
- 13 - Robert Palmer, "Folk, Popular, Jazz, and Classical Elements in New Orleans", pp.199-201.
- 14 - Jason Berry, Jonathon Foose, and Tad Jones, *Up From the Cradle of Jazz -New Orleans Music Since World War II*.