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Connie Zeanah Atkinson  
*University of New Orleans*, [catkinso@uno.edu](mailto:catkinso@uno.edu)

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Louis Armstrong and the Image of New Orleans:  
The Popular as Consequential

Connie Zeanah Atkinson, PhD

Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies

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When I was a student at the Institute of Popular Music at the University of Liverpool, the mostly Oxford- and Cambridge-educated professors often complained of the penchant of the British press to refer to them as “rock docs,” or something similarly dismissive. No matter the depth and rigor of their research, the results were inevitably presented with a hint of “these people are paid to do this?” Today I sympathize with their annoyance. As a professor of history at the University of New Orleans, I teach and research New Orleans music, and as a consequence suffer the occasional implication that my work is less than serious academic business.

On the other hand, there are real problems with New Orleans music historiography, and, I would suggest, these problems are not only hindering further research on New Orleans music, but hold consequences for research on the cultural history of the region generally. Particularly in light of the dispersal of the music community in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, a solid scholarly historical foundation will be crucial to a useful analysis of strategies used by that community to reconstitute itself.

New Orleans is arguably one of the most recognized music cities in the world. It is difficult to find a book on American popular music that does not acknowledge the city’s profound contribution to American music, its influence on the evolution of many musical styles and the extraordinary number of influential musicians who have emerged from there. However, there is little solid work on why and how this came to be. The central theme of the existing literature, both popular and academic, is that the city’s musical successes are an accident, that the city’s musical practices are mystical or intuitive. Pervasive are the abandonment of historical documentation of events, inaccurate biographical data and, more disturbingly, the persistent adoption of themes of racial and geographical dispensations to talent. Disregarding the distinctive experience of the music community of New Orleans and the complicated social and ethnic history of the city, writers have made assumptions that have clouded research on the origins and development of one of the most influential places in American popular music. As a result, the cultural activities of New Orleans, its pedagogic and performance strategies, have been viewed as an aberration, and thus, unsuited as a model for reconstitution elsewhere.

I seldom recognize the New Orleans that I know in many popular music texts. Just as Samuel Charters (1981, p. 148) reflected that writings on Africa were often not about the continent itself but instead merely used Africa as a marker in debates concerning Western political ideals, New Orleans has been used as a counterpoint in debates on

commercialization and authenticity in American popular music, and by extension western society, rather than being investigated for itself. These issues have importance for the contemporary city, since further research on New Orleans is hampered by the impression given by many researchers that everything there is to know about the city is already known; on the contrary, the contemporary city is a vast, untheorized and largely unresearched location that contains a wealth of issues and debates which challenge major assumptions in popular music research. This realization led me to include in my work a search for historical documentation that put contemporary accounts into context, taking into consideration the city's contrasting experience while avoiding allusions to the mysterious, magical or intuitive often ascribed to New Orleans by scholars and journalists alike.

Though the city's musical activities have been cited by canonical music texts as having a profound influence on America popular music, academic research on musicmaking in the city, with the exception of very targeted areas, is surprisingly sparse. Some narrow areas have received considerable attention, while some of the more influential musical activities have been ignored. In particular, books on the early years of jazz are largely uncritical, full of errors and wrongheaded guesses. Using models drawn from experiences in other places, historians have often been led to unsubstantiated and misleading analyses, which have become canonical. By repetition in texts, mythology has become historicized, resulting in a lack of reliable information for researchers in other disciplines. Researchers writing on the city's music have too often depended on these often superficial historical accounts riddled with myth and misunderstanding. Yet these books continue to be used as primary documents by historians and scholars of all stripes, taken at face value, without evaluation or skepticism. This has consequences beyond the city's music. I suggest that historiographic treatment of New Orleans music has been a major contributor to a larger mythology of the city, one based on assumptions of creativity and "race," which has permeated academic as well as journalistic writings on New Orleans.

Historiographic treatment of New Orleans music has been hindered in ways that have mirrored African-American musical historiography generally, ranging from the blatantly racist to nostalgic reveries on a glorious black culture, both equally destructive.<sup>1</sup> Marcus Christian, director of the Negro Writers' Project for the WPA and professor at the University of New Orleans, commented in a hand-written note to himself on the omissions of black contribution to histories written by whites:

We soon concluded that the omission of one-fourth, one-third, or one-half of the population from the true history of the state or region had been a deliberate, purposeful act on the part of most southern historians and was at variance with all documentary data, particularly so, since that region's whole 'way of life' had been predicated largely upon the presence of this one-fourth, one-third, or one-half of the total population (Christian, as quoted in Bryan, 1993, p. 103).

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<sup>1</sup> For more on issues in black music historiography, see Meltzer (1993, p. 4), Floyd (1983, p. 48), and Treitler (1996).

The popular description in many early jazz texts of the emergence of jazz as a “birth” is one result of a lack of information on New Orleans music development. I hate this metaphor. A birth assumes that jazz just appeared, with no preliminary development. It assumes a cataclysmic moment instead of looking at continuity of musical practice that led to the evolution of styles in a particular place, and at the profound creativity of the musicians in that place.

The “birth” metaphor has led researchers to treat the city as a randomly chosen location in which this cataclysmic event of jazz just happened. In many academic texts, jazz ‘happened’ because New Orleans was a port, where musical styles merged, leaving unanswered the question of what does it mean for the history of music that it was this particular port? A similar debate is centered on H. Wiley Hitchcock’s assertion that jazz emerged wherever African and European music came into contact. In that case why not the Carolinas, Mississippi, Jamaica or Angola?

In these accounts New Orleans itself is treated not as the issue, but a symptom, denying the city’s musicians any agency, suggesting that if not New Orleans, it would have been somewhere else. But ports exist all over the world, and jazz did not develop in these places. If this *particular* port is in fact important, could not the city’s music be worth studying for itself?

Another of the many consequences of the city’s music being framed as an ‘accident’ is that the way in which New Orleans musicians have learned to play is thought to be irreproducible, a damaging assessment in the light of the dispersal of New Orleans musicians to other locations. This thinking is reflected in the lack of resources allocated by the city to developing its young musicians. If it’s an accident, if the city just ‘naturally produces’ musicians, where is the need for music education? On the other hand, if the community *has* developed a strategy that contributes to this continual emergence of an extraordinary number of excellent musicians through 250 years, should not that strategy be studied for itself? Should not New Orleans take its place as a center of musical method as well as a center of fun and frivolity?

### **Louis Armstrong**

On the weekend of August 4, 2001, the city of New Orleans held a celebration in honor of the centennial of jazz legend and native son Louis Armstrong. The celebration included a festival and a scholarly conference on the life of Armstrong. The event received national and international media attention, including coverage by the major national television networks. The coverage by one network reveals much about the image of the city *and* Louis Armstrong. Headlining the evening news was an ominous weather report: a hurricane had developed in the Gulf of Mexico. Frightening satellite images showed that New Orleans might lie in the path of the storm. The news anchor announced, ‘Meanwhile, the city of New Orleans is making its own preparations for the hurricane’s arrival.’

Cameras switched to a live shot of the Armstrong Festival, showing New Orleanians dancing with abandon to a jazz band playing on an outdoor stage. The camera panned to a papier-mache statue of Armstrong, arms spread, head

back, with a huge smile. The message was clear: New Orleans is the Big Easy, the City that Care Forgot, and ‘Pops’, or ‘Satchmo’, was looking over the festivities with a benign, huge grin. *The world may be falling apart, but down in New Orleans, they’re having too much fun to care.* Inherent in this message is that New Orleans is a place apart -- either from ignorance or bliss. The news anchor’s extraordinary departure from his usual solemn delivery reflects the universal acceptance of this image -- the city of New Orleans as a place of revelry and music, and Armstrong as the grinning, uncritical representation of a good time. The prime-time coverage of the centennial celebration was an acknowledgement that the city produces great music. But at the same time, the city is represented as a place lacking in discipline, even common sense. So how do you explain the music?

In stark contrast, within the Louis Armstrong conference itself, scholars presented papers revealing details of Armstrong’s life: his emersion from his earliest years in music of all stripes, particularly opera and other western classical styles; his work ethic and the perfection of his technical skills; the depth of his passion for justice in America and how he used his fame to influence politicians to abandon segregation; his prolific correspondence and his unheralded biographical works. How do we justify this man with the simplistic image of Armstrong? And how could we get it so wrong?

Louis Armstrong is an example of how musicians in New Orleans have been portrayed as possessing a creativity borne of instinct and natural ability, rather than acquired through rigorous teaching strategies of the community, both formal and informal, and individual effort. Examples abound but there’s a particularly telling one on the Public Broadcasting System educational website. In its biography of Armstrong, four pieces of information are given: first, that Armstrong’s nickname was “Satchmo (short for Satchelmouth, referring to the size of his mouth),” second, his sense of humor is mentioned; third, he had a “natural and unassuming manner and positive disposition” with an “infectious wide grin.” Lastly is mentioned his innovative style of playing. So half of the information has to do with his grin and the size of his mouth. Not mentioned were his voluminous body of writing, his stand on civil rights. No where are mentioned who taught young Louis how to play, who gave him his instrument, who first took him into the band.

James Lincoln Collier wrote: “Louis Armstrong was born in poverty, schooled in drudgery, and raised in ignorance. Fortunately for him and us, he happened to be a genius.’ For Collier, Armstrong’s genius explained the unexplainable – that such a musician could emerge from New Orleans, a city of untutored, undisciplined musicians where any music of consequence is a happy accident.

References to ‘natural’ rhythms, inherent ability and instinctive performance have permeated New Orleans historiography, beginning with travel writers in the Nineteenth Century, reinforced in jazz criticism in the earlier part of this century, and continuing in popular literature today. Musical activities have been marginalized, talent and expertise have been subverted and cultural activities have been exoticized in a way that denies intelligence and agency.

In particular, music historiography has continued to ignore class and ethnic diversity of black Southerners and the heterogeneous pattern of black musical development in the United States, and particularly the South, which in turn has denied the diversity of black musical expression.<sup>2</sup> Current discussions on culture and identity in anthropology and ethnomusicology that have challenged the idea of homogeneous and distinct music communities have problematised these assumptions.<sup>3</sup> In addition, New Orleans music historiography that has identified groups by color, as opposed to ethnicity, has led researchers down dead-end avenues of 'race' that do not apply in this context, or perhaps any context. More dangerous, the attribution of certain creative predispositions to particular mythical 'color' groups has surfaced again and again in jazz history, and has no place in serious scholarship. Meanwhile there has been very little serious study of the community behind the music to let us know WHY the city has been so influential. Writers, without doing the work, just guess, and fail to trace the components that make up the extraordinary musical milieu of this city.

It takes little investigation to discover the French and Spanish colonial circumstances that allowed Africans their cultural activities; the enormous appetite of the early settlers for dancing of all kinds; the isolation of this far-flung colony; the use of music and dance for a socializing tool when many language groups were brought together; the extraordinary value the community places on music, and the dialogic and improvisational nature of local musics. *This* could be why New Orleans has been the place of emergence of many musical styles. Add to this the long, slow exposure to music in public settings that serve to educate its young (as musicians and as audiences), the subtropical climate that allowed performance out of doors, for all to hear, and above all, the second line tradition, that cultural community-creating exercise that puts the audiences and dancers in charge of the music. These factors, along with the creativity and intelligence of the musicians, serve to foster the music that seems like such an accident. Conceding the discipline, intelligence and musical knowledge required in much of the performance of New Orleans music contradicts popular music discourse that often represents New Orleans musicians as relating to music in an emotional, instinctual, unmediated fashion.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to take this opportunity to make a simple plea to historians of the Gulf South region to use existing New Orleans music historiography with care – to hold it to the same rigorous standards as one would hold other areas of Gulf South research. This is not a trivial request. In New Orleans for two centuries at least, cultural

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<sup>2</sup> See bell hooks (1989, p. 11) on the issue of the multiplicity of voices in African-American identity vs. an 'authentic' African-American voice presumed by 'white' audiences. This can be said for historical treatment of the American South generally. Popular music writers often have talked about Southerners as consisting of two distinct groups, defined by 'colour', disregarding major differences in class, ethnicity, and experience within the region which may cut across lines of 'colour' or 'race.' See for example Small (1994), etc. Also, see Keil quoted in Monson (1994, p. 288) on authentic blackness associated with class status.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Waterman (1990), Slobin (1993), Monson (1994), and Stokes (1992).

activities involving music have been an important place for debates on ownership, control and identity, a sphere for early civic identity as well as for black assertiveness and resistance. What happens in the sphere of music is of importance to the city and the region in more ways than entertainment. The life and career of Louis Armstrong brings many of these issues into play, and challenges longstanding notions of New Orleans development, pointing out the profound misunderstanding by many music historians of this community and its relationship to its music.

There are other potential consequences. Recently, we have seen how federal agencies may have withheld help to the city of New Orleans because of largely false reports of violence in the city during the flood. The fear of black young people by emergency managers may very well have cost lives. As the decisionmakers hesitated, perhaps frozen by fears based on mythologies of race, the waters rose and people drowned. I don't believe it is too extreme to use this very recent, and very personal example to remind ourselves that there is no good excuse for not bringing to every subject the same rigorous standards that we bring to any subject. No matter if it is Louisiana politics or Louisiana music, Louisiana colonial life or Louisiana social life, the rules of research and historical methodology insure that we do not replicate false perceptions of 'race.'

In writing about New Orleans, the early historians of New Orleans jazz, predominantly European, were faced with a difficult task: unraveling a daunting cultural history, complex and incomplete, with little to use as source material. Unfamiliar with the social history of the Franco-African community and the city's divergent colonial experience, trained in western musical criticism, and perhaps lacking in recognition of the very possibility of black achievement, these writers searched for ground upon which they were familiar. European critical modes, unsuited to African musical styles, were evoked, while European influence and forms were emphasized. Today we no longer have this excuse. These early books should no longer be used as primary materials. Through the efforts of researchers willing to re-engage early texts and bring historical methods to the task, we find a new beginning for research on New Orleans music, one that opens up opportunities to listen to voices that have been heretofore silenced, and takes into account the intelligence, creativity and pedagogical strategies of the artists and composers of New Orleans music.

Perhaps we can say about *the city of New Orleans* what Armstrong scholar Joshua Berrett said about Armstrong:

“Contrary to popular stereotypes, Louis Armstrong was no American Primitive, although for publicity purposes he did cultivate that image at times: He was, rather, a literate, acutely observant artist whose music reflects a broad listening experience, catholic taste, and a consummate gift for weaving a welter of random impressions garnered from disparate sources into his improvisations.”

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