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“300 Years of New Orleans Music: The Rhythm of the City”

By Connie Zeanah Atkinson

First published in *New Orleans the First 300 Years*. Errol and Peggy Scott Laborde, editors, 2017. A joint venture of Pelican Publishing Company and public television station WYES with the assistance of The Historic New Orleans Collection on the occasion of the Tricentennial of the City of New Orleans. From migration to politics to music to ethnic culture and identity, this comprehensive volume touches on all aspects of New Orleans history for the past 300 years.

“With contributions from some of the leading influencers and scholars of New Orleans cultural history, including a foreword by Professor Emeritus Lawrence N. Powell, no stone is left unturned. This is the quintessential book on New Orleans for every history buff, citizen of New Orleans, or visitor wanting to know more about who we are and how we got here.”

Almost from its beginning, the city of New Orleans has been associated with music and dancing. Early in its colonial years, locals of all conditions could hear music in a variety of settings – sacred and secular, classical and popular, out of doors and in concert halls. Young New Orleanians took up music, and it became the family business for many who were denied other opportunities. The sheer number of musicians and places to play defined and refined the city’s reputation and relationship with the rest of the country and the world.

The city’s enthusiasm for music evolved as a practical response of a new people in the new world. In contrast to its Protestant neighbors, Catholic New Orleans had no censure against dance, and for an immigrant destination with people of many languages, dancing was a convenient, inexpensive and enjoyable means of socializing. Locals had an appetite for new dances, and in this busy port, with ships coming in daily from the Caribbean and Gulf, new sounds came ashore with the new arrivals. Musical genealogists trace these rhythms into the city and into the repertoire of local musicians, where styles and beats were absorbed, altered, incorporated, becoming local signatures, recognizable signs that reaffirmed a local identity, creating community of the disparate and polyglot population of this far-flung place. Simply put, music helped create New Orleans in the local imagination, and the constant need for a musical accompaniment to the city’s myriad celebrations created new opportunities for musicians to play.

Although slavery was as violent and abusive in French and Spanish New Orleans as in other places in the South, both French and Spanish colonial governments did allow New Orleanians of African descent some freedom to perform their music, making New Orleans one of the few places in the US where people of European descent could hear and absorb the musical values of the African continent and Afro-Caribbean. In addition, since enslaved New Orleanians had opportunities to make money and thus could attend European-style musical performances, New Orleanians of African descent could absorb European musical values as well. So from the earliest days, New Orleans was a place where a musician had access to a range of musics and the style of music played was not limited by the musician's ethnicity.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that in this place the musicians eventually devised a musical style that took advantage of all these varied influences, allowing each musician a voice for his or her own distinct message, and the confidence to jump from the written score. And that's what some call America's original art form, jazz. Ah, the irony -- a music for, but certainly not of, America's Protestant/Puritan founders became what Albert Murray called "the national soundtrack."

In fact, Wynton Marsalis and others have called jazz a metaphor for democracy – the balance of the individual with the communal. Maybe this explains why the place where this music emerged looms so large in the American imagination – the land of dreamy dreams. Jazz reflected its hometown – an American place with an impulse for diversity, for all to have a voice... a goal seldom reached but a persistent dream nonetheless, revealed in its music. Within the music lay the potential for freedom for all, and worldwide, people heard and responded to that musical message. Jazz became the logo for an age, the sound of freedom, and New Orleans as its site of emergence became forever associated with the music.

To spotlight a few New Orleans musicians in a survey of the city's music is to leave out a host of others equally worthy of mention. The names most familiar to music fans – Armstrong, Gottschalk, Domino, Bechet, Prima, Fountain, Connick – represent but a handful of the creators and craftsmen of New Orleans music. Innovators, masters of their instruments, protégés, mentors, divas, entertainers and teachers abound. Branches of family trees are heavy with musicians: Humphreys, Batistes, Barbarins, Marsalises, Nevilles. Sidemen with names familiar only to musical insiders brought New Orleans to the likes of James Brown, Duke Ellington, Ornette Coleman. The work, if not the names, of New Orleans studio musicians are recognized by popular

music fans everywhere, not to mention those multitude of New Orleans musicians never or seldom captured on disc who created the thousands of magical nights in smoky clubs, moments of ecstasy at festivals and churches, who again and again made us fall in love with our city, and sometimes with each other.

What links these disparate musicians? Most were products of thick, overlapping networks of families, neighborhoods, and social institutions. Most as children and before formal instruction had heard a variety of music in a variety of places. Many benefitted from a series of mentors and music teachers in and out of the band room willing to share experiences and bandstands with younger musicians. For generations, the pedagogical strategies of New Orleans – long, slow exposure without overpraising, hands-on experience and opportunities for youngsters -- successfully produced generations of excellent and versatile musicians.

Somewhere at the end of the 19th century, New Orleans musicians, a little bored with ragtime, began collectively improvising on a mélange of current musics -- brass band marches, quadrilles, danza and danzon. From practically the moment of release of the first jazz record by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band in 1917, jazz became the nation's hottest popular music and the New Orleans jazz musician became the city's big export. The most renowned of these was Louis Armstrong, probably the musician most associated with jazz and with New Orleans. His career mirrored that of many young local musicians -- exposure to a variety of musical styles from blues to opera, instruction and mentorship by such as Peter Davis and Joe "King" Oliver -- but his virtuosity and innovation, his personal charm and generosity, made "Pops" one of the most famous people on earth.

In the 1950s and '60s, New Orleans music again hit big in the recording world, only this time, the recording was done in New Orleans. Some of the best loved American popular music came out of this period from small, locally owned recording studios. The war years brought a ban on recordings, and now, tired of war and with money in their pockets from war production jobs, young Americans were ready for new sounds. New Orleans R&B reflected the optimism and youth of the era - simple, fun songs played by master musicians for teenagers to dance to. Non-threatening, happy music, most exemplified by the artist whose brother-in-law called him a country and western musician, Antoine "Fats" Domino. Selling over one hundred million records to fans all over the country and across oceans, Domino reflected the idealized world-view of New Orleans – happy, carefree, uncomplicated. Along with Domino were dozens of local recording artists

cranking out the hits for juke boxes from coast to coast. In Cosimo Matassa's J&M studio and later in Allen Toussaint and Marshall Sehorn's SeaSaint studios, the hits just kept on coming, filling the *Billboard* charts and rocking the car radios of the rock and roll years.

Meanwhile, in 1973, the Orleans Parish School Board, with the support of the Arts Council, opened the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, a tuition-free instruction center for the city's young talent. Although the school's goal was not to produce superstar musicians but rather to furnish an arts education to the city's children, produce them it did, with its first few graduating classes including Harry Connick Jr, Branford Marsalis, Terence Blanchard, Donald Harrison, and Wynton Marsalis. By 1990, Wynton graced the cover of *Time* Magazine, which proclaimed "The New Jazz Age." He embraced, unashamedly, the New Orleans music tradition of respect for the past along with personal expression in the present, brushed off NY critics with a disdain to which they were not accustomed, and, as winner of the Pulitzer Prize and as artistic director of New York's Jazz at Lincoln Center, established himself as a jazz icon. His thoughtful reflections on New Orleans jazz history have kept the city of New Orleans in the conversation while his virtuosity has reinforced ideas of New Orleans musicianship.

New Orleans may be primarily known outside the city for jazz, but it is also home to a large gospel community. The birthplace of the Queen of Gospel, Mahalia Jackson, New Orleans was one of the first places where gospel was performed within Catholic churches. Today, music clubs, festivals, and even conventions regularly feature gospel choirs. Writings on New Orleans music often overlook gospel, and in doing so miss a major force in the sustaining of musical instruction and performance that support the city's music industry. Also, the emphasis by scholars on jazz and R&B in New Orleans often denies the participation of women, who for example are active in gospel in all phases, including organization and administration.

Brass bands, popular in New Orleans since the early 19th century, had begun to fade in the city by the 1970s, but an intervention by banjoist/guitarist Danny Barker led to a rebirth of the brass band tradition. Recently returned from a successful career in New York, Barker founded a brass band for the young people of the Fairview Baptist Church. The Fairview Band launched the careers of many young musicians and popular brass bands such as the Dirty Dozen. Through his mentorship and inspiration, today brass bands are synonymous with New Orleans music and culture.

In the 1990s, New Orleans rappers developed their own up-tempo, bass heavy, call and response version of the genre, called Bounce music. Around the new millennium, local rappers achieved tremendous success that made many of them multimillionaires and hip hop became the city's most lucrative cultural export, mainly because New Orleans was home to two giants of the hip hop industry, Master P's No Limit Records and the Williams Brothers' Cash Money Records. These labels spawned an incredible number of international rap stars. Embracing New Orleans musical traditions, New Orleans rappers incorporate brass-band street-parade instrumentations/rhythms and Mardi Gras Indian chants into the hip-hop collage while becoming a prime vehicle for social and political commentary and community celebration.

Two major forces serve as bookends for the story of New Orleans music in this last century – the emergence of jazz and the series of governmental and ecological failures that became known as the Katrina event. Neither happened as the events that they were portrayed: jazz as a cataclysmic event vs. jazz as a practical response to myriad influences; Katrina as a cataclysmic hurricane vs. Katrina as the culmination of geographic, infrastructural and social neglect. But those two events shaped the perception of music in New Orleans just as the flooding shaped the topology of the city.

New Orleans post-Katrina remains a city in recovery. Historically drawing its cultural vitality from its non-professional cultural industries -- the local celebrations, the street parades, the social institutions – it still suffers the loss of neighborhoods and the dispersal of performers. But despite disruption and disaster, with little support for education and infrastructure, New Orleanians still put their energies into music and the world continues to listen.

Jazz and gospel, R&B and hip hop, brass bands and rock & roll... the families, neighborhoods, churches and schools have nurtured and created opportunities for young New Orleanians to find their expression through music. Each generation has used music to express its own distinctive voice, while often giving a nod to those who came before. The sounds coming from the wards and neighborhoods may differ, drawn from the distinct history and experience of the residents, but they all thrive under the second line umbrella of New Orleans music.

ATKINSON BIO

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