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# Since the Flood

## Scenes from the Fight for New Orleans Jazz Culture



In this place, there is a custom for the funerals of jazz musicians. The funeral procession parades slowly through the streets, followed by a band playing a mournful dirge as it moves to the cemetery. Once the casket has been laid in place, the band breaks into a joyful second line, symbolizing the triumph of the spirit over death. Tonight the Gulf Coast is still coming through the dirge, yet we will live to see the second line.

—President George W. Bush, televised address from Jackson Square, French Quarter, New Orleans, September 15, 2005

By mid-October, when the first real second-line parade rolled in the streets of New Orleans, in memoriam for chef Austin Leslie, President Bush had disappeared along with and most of the recovery assistance he'd promised. The jazz funeral and the second-line parade would be invoked again and again in the name of recovery, yet nowhere as crudely as in Bush's address.

Yes, the glorious and exotic culture of New Orleans provided potent metaphor. Those jazz musicians, Mardi Gras Indians, and fancy-dancing second-liners made for instant B-roll and catchy human-interest characters in story after story of despair and destruction, repair and resilience. And they raised questions. Would the musicians return? Would they get new instruments? Could they find their groove and inspire good times again de-

spite the pain? Largely missed was the fact that those at the center of New Orleans jazz culture were very much the foreground story. They held the keys to the larger questions of recovery. And, out of view of most cameras, they—and what they stood for—weren't exactly welcomed back.

Second line parades are derived from traditional brass band funeral processions, a defining element of New Orleans jazz culture that transforms mourners into celebrants through music as it moves from dirge to uptempo rhythm once a body is "cut loose." The "second line" originally referred to those who followed the main line, the family and friends of the deceased, funeral directors and musicians. Second line parades, as they've come to be called, are four-hour Sunday afternoon affairs, sponsored by social aid and pleasure clubs, organizations that are direct descendants of Reconstruction-era black benevolent societies. The jazz funerals and second line parades referenced in Bush's speech in fact formed the first post-Katrina expressions of community, the earliest assertions of a right to return. A year later, those parades were threatened by Draconian fees and restrictions. The musicians who honor their dead in the processions Bush described occasionally faced arrest, cited with "disturbing the peace." And at Mardi Gras Indian gatherings (a closely related and no less significant tradition), the spectacle of black men standing fierce in eight-foot-tall suits of feathers and beads, doing battle by competing to be "prettiest," had more than once been overtaken by the sirens and flashing lights of NOPD cruisers. Tensions have long existed between the city's black culture bearers and its power brokers, but what's happened since the flood, what's still happening, is of a different order and begs consideration in a deeper, more urgent context.

There's a culture war going on in New Orleans—one with deep historical roots but also brand-new firepower and dangerous stakes. That conflict defines the tangle of issues figuring into the rebuilding process (which has ended up meaning the creation of a "new" New Orleans more so than a recovery of the old one) and the matters of race and class underscoring them all. The story of how this culture war has played out provides a piercing look at New Orleans since the flood, as well as into how we really feel about traditions that have helped shape American music for more than a century. And it makes clear that New Orleans—a city built on culture, a city that to so many stands for culture—must be rebuilt through culture if it is to stand for anything at all—or just stand.

I know all that now, but I didn't when I began writing about New Orleans after the flood. In October 2005, I'd penned an angst-ridden essay for Salon about the cultural implications of the Katrina tragedy. Soon after, I spent a week researching a *Village Voice* article timed to precede the annual New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, which, merely by virtue of its mounting that year, was a mighty symbol and not minor triumph of communal will and fundraising. I'd set out to document the reality confronted by the prime movers within the city's musical subcultures: the network of jazz musicians, the stable of brass band players and their closely aligned social aid and pleasure clubs and second-line dancers, the tribes of Mardi Gras Indians. I wanted to detail the situation from their eyes, outline their challenges, and evaluate the potential for communal loss or recovery.

As I researched, the dimensions of crisis in what has long been considered the birthplace of jazz grew larger and clearer: As historian Ned Sublette put it when I called in September 2005: "We're not just watching history disappear, history is watching us disappear." I sensed what he meant. As Ellis Marsalis explained in his living room in early 2006: "In other cities, culture comes from the top down. In New Orleans, it's the reverse: it springs from the street up. No neighborhoods, no culture." He was right. The culture of New Orleans depends on the integrity of its black neighborhoods, however troubled, lest it be turned into a tourist show or museum piece. And lest it lose its function, leaving a whole lot of people disenfranchised.

One nagging fact ignited my passion: after writing about American culture for twenty years, I was surprised to find many in my so-called jazz community oddly complacent about the cultural consequences of the flood, strangely unaffected by what has and has not happened in New Orleans in its aftermath. New Orleans was history to them, owed a debt of gratitude and proper credit (see episodes 1–4 of Ken Burns's PBS series, *Jazz*) but otherwise largely irrelevant to the present modern-jazz moment. I knew that wasn't true. New Orleans produced the first real jazz star, Louis Armstrong, and it is, I've come to believe, the only place left in this country with a real living jazz culture—one in which swinging music is elemental to the everyday lives of large swaths of ordinary people. Placed in stark relief since 2005 is whether that culture—which Burns's series famously cast as a signal of American values and virtues on

the order of the Constitution—still carried currency when it comes to the issues Katrina raised: identity, race, poverty, and basic decency.

## Possible Body

By March 2006, six months after the floods that followed the levee failures, New Orleans was two cities, so starkly in contrast it tested the mind's limits. One New Orleans inched toward renewal, the other was caught in what David Winkler-Schmidt of the local *Gambit Weekly* called "the horrible unending of not knowing."

Stick to the "Sliver by the River," the high-ground neighborhoods along the Mississippi's banks, and you might have thought the place was healing. Take a taxi from Louis Armstrong Airport to the French Quarter and you might easily miss the fading water line, fourteen feet high in some places, on the sides of buildings as you sailed down I-10. Sluggishly approaching its former self, the Quarter again boasted coffee and beignets, music in the air and mystery around each corner.

But the Gray Line Hurricane Katrina bus tour revealed miles of destruction, still stunning six months past the storm. And the Gray Line didn't even run through the devastation of the Lower Ninth Ward: houses impaled by cars or reduced to rubble that stretched as far as the eye could see. Signs tacked to lampposts voiced suspicions: "Saw Levee Break? Witnesses Wanted." Spray-painted notes from house-by-house search teams bore gruesome details, like the one marked simply, "Possible Body." Graffiti had been scrawled on the side of Fats Domino's house—"R.I.P. Fats. You Will Be Missed." Domino wasn't gone, thanks to a dramatic rescue. In fact, he had just released a new album, *Alive and Kickin'*, benefiting the Tipitina's Foundation, one of several aid organizations then feverishly working to help revive a culture in crisis. All of these groups were well meaning but none yet up to the task of finding, let alone funding, the thousands of missing folks who shaped the city's culture.

Somewhat miraculously though also sort of predictably, the music had trickled back. Plenty of it. Already the music section of *Gambit Weekly* listed local clubs hosting favorite bands. Kermit Ruffins was back on Thursday nights at Vaughan's, the wonderful Mid-City hole-in-the-wall joint where the crowd always spilled out onto Lesseps Street.

Donna's Bar and Grill, a charmingly run-down corner bar across the street from Armstrong Park, on North Rampart Street, the dividing line

between the French Quarter and Tremé, was open, its hand-painted wooden sign still missing one chunk of its upper righthand corner, as if someone had taken a bite. At Donna's, the guys who'd stopped by and sat in with drummer Shannon Powell on one Sunday night explained what it had taken to get there: they were driving in from Atlanta or Baton Rouge or Houston—wherever they'd dropped anchor after the evacuation—to make the gig; they needed the money, and they needed to play for a hometown crowd.

Uptown on Oak Street at the Maple Leaf Bar, the cavernous room next door to the bar was mostly full whenever the Rebirth Brass Band played its Tuesday gig, even though the Tulane kids had yet to return to the nearby university campus. Phil Frazier, Rebirth's leader, sat in the back near the pool table in between sets, one hand on his tuba and the other on his cellphone. His thick shoulders, on which rested his weighty instrument much of the time, drooped. He described how hard it had been to reassemble the group while living in Houston, his band mates fanned out over four states. "I used up a whole lotta minutes," he said, looking hard at his Nokia. He and the guys were grateful for those gigs; they had houses to rebuild and kids to feed.

If the Maple Leaf gig was still irregular, it was only because the group was on the road so much: It seemed every city wanted to book a brass band from New Orleans named Rebirth just then. The band had adopted the name in the 1980s, to signal the revival of a brass-band tradition that had waned through the 1970s. And sure enough, in the years that followed, in the Ninth Ward, the Seventh Ward, and especially in Tremé, kids began to pick up brass instruments, snare and bass drums again and parade up and down the streets. They were inspired by Rebirth's fiery sound, and how Frazier's tuba playing anchored each tune with the hip authority of, say, bassist James Jamerson on Motown hits. Where would those kids live now? How would they learn tradition, without soaking it up every day, just down the block, the way Frazier had from guys with names like Tuba Fats and Frog Joseph. Most of Tremé's homes survived Katrina. But the costs of moving back were prohibitive, and the state-run Road Home assistance wasn't yet available (and would prove to be a troubled tangle of red tape once it was). Besides, the regular jobs and the schools were still gone.

"Rebirth," Frazier sighed. "What's that mean now?"

## Won't Bow Down

"Have you ever seen people build a home?" Donald Harrison asked a roomful of teenagers one Monday night in March 2006 at The Music Shed studio in the Garden District. "Well, you start with the foundation. And then you've got the support beams. If all that's not intact, it won't matter what you do—the whole thing will come crashing down."

Harrison knows a great deal about constructing a solo and, just then, whether he liked it or not, more than a thing or two about building a house. Like so many of his New Orleans neighbors, the first floor of his home in the Broadmoor section was stripped to its beams. On a corner across the street from Harrison's home, the elegant front façade was all that remained of another home, leaning precariously against three support beams.

At forty-six, Harrison had a unique perspective on the precariousness of the moment, in cultural terms, because his life and career have embraced so much of what defines New Orleans culture. In his early teens, he began playing saxophone with Ernest "Doc" Paulin's brass band, a seminal group for generations of players. He studied at New Orleans Center for Cultural Arts (NOCCA), the finishing school for a long list of jazz stars. He played in Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, then co-led a band with another hometown hero, the trumpeter Terence Blanchard. An established jazz star who spent much of the 1980s and 1990s in New York City, Harrison is nonetheless best known to some in his hometown as a Mardi Gras Indian chief and the son of Donald Harrison Sr., who was himself a Big Chief of four different Mardi Gras Indian tribes.

"The Mardi Gras Indian rhythms and chants were really the very first music that entered my consciousness," Harrison said as he sat on his front stoop, squinting in the midday sun. "My mom remembers me tapping out the beats on the side of my crib. But I didn't get the connection between the jazz I was playing and that culture until I started coming out with the Indians again, and my dad was singing 'Shallow Water.' When I heard that again, the chanting—'shallow water / oh mama / shallow water / oh mama'—and the rhythm behind that chant, in the back of my head, I started hearing Blakey's drums. I thought, 'Wow, this is all starting to make sense.' I stopped thinking of music in boxes."

Shortly before Donald Sr. died, Harrison recorded "Indian Blues," blending New York–based jazz with the chants and drums of New Orleans–

based Mardi Gras Indians, including his father. After his father's death in 1998, Harrison assumed the role of Big Chief and named his tribe Congo Nation, after Congo Square. Harrison's childhood in the Ninth Ward was something out of a Norman Rockwell painting—specifically, *The Problem We All Live With*, Rockwell's 1964 rendering of a six-year-old black girl's being led into the all-white William Frantz Elementary School, the first such integration in Louisiana. Harrison, who was born in 1960, attended Frantz.

"That was my first introduction to the need not just for resistance but for a change in values," he said. "In America, people of African descent are taught that where we came from is nothing. We have a day to celebrate Irish American pride, St. Patrick's Day, and a great parade in New York to celebrate Italian American heritage. We have to come to grips that people of African descent are important too. So the pageantry of the Mardi Gras Indians means something."

The legacy of black New Orleans residents dressing up like Native Americans and parading on Mardi Gras Day dates back more than a century. Through costumes and rituals, it perpetuates not just an African consciousness, but also a bond with another oppressed and marginalized people, Native Americans. (There's far more to that connection, including the inspiring presence of William "Buffalo Bill" Cody's *Wild West* production and the fact that Native Americans took in runaway slaves to the history of intermarriage.) In Native Americans, these present-day "Indians" have an example of an indigenous culture that has been all but erased. Mardi Gras Indian culture is extravagant, bold, and completely subterranean: word of when and where a Big Chief "comes out" on Mardi Gras Day is shared strictly on a need-to-know basis. (That's less true these days than in decades past—some Indian practices are now publicized in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*—but it's still not primarily a commercial endeavor.) It is the city's clearest and strongest culture of resistance. A Mardi Gras Indian would never apply for a city permit to assemble.

New Orleans was a major port of entry for Sicilian immigrants during the late nineteenth century and is still home to large Italian American enclaves. The Feast of St. Joseph is a citywide event: It's also one of three times each year that Mardi Gras Indian tribes gather en masse in New Orleans. By 7 P.M. on a warm Sunday, St. Joseph's night, the pageantry Harrison had described was on display, along with its surrounding reality.

The intersection of Washington Avenue and La Salle Street was packed

with Indians, decked out in feathers and beads. Across the street, A. L. Davis Park, named for a reverend and civil rights activist, was filled with FEMA trailers housing displaced families. Looking fierce in his African-inspired green-and-red mask, Victor Harris, Big Chief of the Fi-Yi-Yi tribe, shouted, "They spit us all over this land. They told us we had to evacuate. But they didn't say we had to stay away."

Spy boys led the way. Flag boys bore identifying colors. Chiefs haltingly greeted fellow chiefs. Suddenly, the sound of the drums and the colorful wash of feathers were overpowered by sirens and flashing lights. Police cars drove straight through the procession, enacting their own now annual ritual. Some officers wore uniforms emblazoned with SWAT team logos. Representatives of the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Lawyers Guild signified too, with armbands marked "Legal Observer." Harris turned to his wild man: 'We know what they're trying to say. 'You're not welcome back.'" When the cruisers had passed and the sirens died down, a few, then dozens of Indians, began singing "Indian Red," raising their voices at the lines: "We won't bow down / not on the dirty ground."

The next day, in front of the trailer in which his mother was living, next to the ruins of her home, Harrison framed the scenario. "What's happening in New Orleans right now is a test for the soul of America. If we say the cultural roots of this city are unimportant, then America is unimportant. "I'm going to continue to be a Mardi Gras Indian. I'm going to play my saxophone. If enough people do their part, everything will endure. But that's the question: Will people be allowed to do their part?"



### Silence Is Violence

The first week of January 2007 brought with it an alarming fact, for those who took note: more Americans had died thus far in the new year in New Orleans than in Iraq. Fourteen between December 29, 2006, and January 8, 2007. New Orleans had long vied with other cities—Newark, Washington—as this country's most dangerous. CNN used a graphic—"Murder City, USA"—when reporting on post-Katrina New Orleans; not a new sentiment exactly, but a seemingly cynical jab at a place suffering a fresh wave of violent crime in the wake of disaster.

Two murders in particular sounded a citywide alarm, and sent specific shock waves through the cultural community: On January 3, the film-

maker Helen Hill was shot and killed in her own home in the Marigny neighborhood, as her husband and two-year-old child watched helplessly. A week prior, during a nine-hour stretch in which eighteen people were fatally wounded in the city, Dinneral Shavers, the snare drummer of the Hot 8 Brass Band and a teacher at Rabouin High, was shot in his car on Dumaine Street, his wife at his side. The gunman was suspected of having been shooting at Shavers's stepson, who was in the back seat. Shavers died in surgery hours later.

The Hot 8, already local favorites, had risen rapidly and recently to more widespread attention. They'd appeared in Spike Lee's HBO documentary *When the Levees Broke*. Just after Katrina, they'd been caught by the CNN anchorwoman Rusty Dornin, in uplifting performance at a Baton Rouge evacuee shelter.

Bennie Pete, a mountain of a man and the group's leader, has a soft, high voice that belies both his size and the rippling intensity of his tuba playing. "I wasn't thinking about music or the band or nothing like that when we first met up again in Baton Rouge," he told me in front of the Sound Café, a New Orleans coffee shop that has become a center for both music and activism. "I thought about survival, about my mom and dad. But it was beautiful. We just showed up, started blowing. And people began to smile and cry and dance. That's my band! It was a healing thing."

"I remember that the news crews didn't understand why we'd bring a band in here," said Lee Arnold, a band admirer who, since the storm, had grown into the Hot 8's aggressively creative manager. "Some of the Red Cross people were like, 'These people are so sad, they don't need this now.' They thought it was silly or even wrong."

"But when we kicked it," Pete said, "they all got it—the relief workers, the MPS, everyone. The TV stations showed up. They wanted to know who we were."

For a dozen years now, ever since two young bands, the Looney Tunes and the High Steppers, merged, the Hot 8 has been called with increasing frequency in its hometown for second lines, house parties, and club gigs. They've inherited a powerful tradition, and some say it's their turn to rule the streets. A subtly significant rivalry between New Orleans brass bands plays out mostly through second lines: whoever moves the dancers best claims victory. Rebirth's Phil Frazier recalls one parade in particular. "The Hot 8 was playing so hot, coming up from behind us, that we actually marched to the side, let them through," he says. "Bennie was trying to

duck down, but I said, 'You can't hide, we know you're coming on. They're dancing for you today.'"

For the Hot 8, Shavers's murder was a devastating loss. It was also the continuation of band history marked by tragedy. In 1996, the trumpeter Jacob Johnson was found shot execution-style in his home. In 2004, the trombonist Joe Williams was shot dead by police in curious and never resolved circumstances. In the spring of 2006, trumpeter Terrell Batiste lost his legs in a horrific roadside accident after relocating to Atlanta.

A sense of purposeful outrage began to take shape around the murders of Shavers, a young black man, and Hill, a young white woman. Baty Landis, a Tulane University musicologist who ran a bookstore and adjoining coffee shop, Sound Café, joined together with Helen Gillet, a cellist, and Ken Foster, a poet, and planned a public gathering. They aimed to plan a march on City Hall to demand that the city address the unanswered problem of violent crime in the city. If it was an unlikely trio of leaders, the meeting place, Landis's café, was a natural choice. The Hot 8 had regularly performed there on Wednesday nights, and Hill had frequently stopped by with her toddler son, Francis. Participants took turns voicing their ideas by passing around a "talking stick," a feather-laden Bayou Steppers Social Aid and Pleasure Club fan, of which Landis was a member.

Standing atop a piano bench, Landis announced that marchers, including the remaining members of the Hot 8 Brass Band, would gather Thursday at 11 A.M., in front of the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas, near the foot of Canal Street. They expected to reach City Hall around noon. No one was sure how many people would show up.

By 10:30 the following Thursday morning, some four thousand assembled and began their slow march, led by the members of the Hot 8 and other musicians who'd been close to Shavers. Some of the students from Rabouin, where Shavers had organized a marching band and had raised funds for instruments, were there. By the time the march reached City Hall, there were at least eight thousand people on hand. A temporary podium had been set up. Several speakers—community organizers, city council members, residents—took turns outlining their demands of Police Chief Riley and Mayor Nagin: more cops on the street, better protection for witnesses, and more accountability by police and the district attorney. Finally, trombonist Glen David Andrews addressed the crowd:

"We are young black men of New Orleans preaching culture."

A spontaneous chant sprang up: "Music in the schools. Music in the schools."

*Where else would that happen?*

### Right to Roll

The 2007 New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival kicked up on April 24—good news from a city wracked by too much bad. "Now, in a way, it's even harder," the festival producer Quint Davis told me when I dropped by his office. He'd upped the ante for the 2007 event, packing its six days denser than last year, with acts ranging from big-ticket draws to local heroes—Rod Stewart and Van Morrison to Gregg Stafford's Young Tuxedo Brass Band.

"The euphoria of destruction has passed," he said. "We're in the reality of the long-term recovery. None of this is going to get someone a check from the 'Road Home' program. None will rebuild their house or get their insurance straight. But it will do something important beyond all that." The Road Home Program, run by a private company contracted by the state to distribute federal aid to homeowners, was by all accounts a disaster, a Kafkaesque bureaucracy. Locals had taken to calling it "Road to Nowhere."

Inside the Fair Grounds, at the Jazz and Heritage Festival—second only to Mardi Gras as a tourist draw for the city—cultural traditions like the second-line parade were proudly on display. There were three listed in the festival program each day. Outside the Fair Grounds was a different story.

Just three days before members of the Nine Times Social Aid and Pleasure Club would dance their way through Fair Grounds—second-lining with the Mahogany Brass Band—they appeared in federal court. On April 25, the U.S. District judge Kurt Engelhardt heard arguments on behalf of a consortium of social aid and pleasure clubs, aided by the ACLU, in a lawsuit protesting the city's hiking of police security fees—in some cases, triple or more from pre-Katrina rates—for the regular Sunday second lines, held September through May. The suit invoked the First Amendment right to freedom of speech and expression, claiming that parade permit schemes "effectively tax" such expression.

Despite a newfound regard for the sort of catharsis offered by second lines, the tradition was now newly and pointedly caught in the cross-

hairs of controversy in New Orleans. A shooting in the vicinity of a historic January unified parade—several clubs, parading as one—in 2006 was the original impetus for the permit fee; more protection was needed, the police department claimed, and somebody was going to have to pay for those officers. As a result, the city raised permit fees for second-line parades.

Tamara Jackson, who had organized the Social Aid and Pleasure Club Task Force in Katrina's wake, would have none of this. "This amounts to a tax for crimes the social aid and pleasure clubs don't commit and can't control," she said. "Don't we already pay taxes that pay for police?" She approached the ACLU staff attorney Katy Schwartzmann, who filed suit on behalf of seventeen sponsoring clubs.

"Should the law not be enjoined," read the ACLU complaint filed in *Social Aid & Pleasure Club Task Force v. City of New Orleans*, "there is very little doubt that plaintiff's cultural tradition will cease to exist."

"It's a solid, core ACLU issue," Schwartzmann explained when I visited her offices. "We handle freedom of speech cases all the time," she explained. "But this one is different in that the speech at issue signifies this city and an entire cultural tradition. At some point, I mean, the power to tax is the power to eliminate, right? At some point, if the government can put enough fees and enough obstacles in the way of somebody exercising their First Amendment right, then they're ultimately going to eliminate it."

Item 51 of the complaint put it this way: "Many members of the Clubs, including Plaintiffs, are working class families. They are persons struggling to return the City of New Orleans, dealing with the loss of family unity, the loss of homes, and the loss of normalcy. The City of New Orleans, rather than encouraging their return, has instead created barriers to the resumption of an important means of expression for those returning to New Orleanians. The Second Line tradition is a peaceful, nonviolent tradition. What the criminals could not destroy the City is; rather than protecting, it is punishing the victims."

Delay after delay from the city's attorney left the case unresolved for roughly a year. But the matter needed settling. And when the annual Original Pigeontown Steppers Easter Sunday parade was slapped with a permit fee of $7,560 (a price inflated yet further due to holiday pay for officers), it was time to force the issue.

On a bright Thursday morning, three-dozen club members gathered at

the federal courthouse near Lafayette Square for an evidentiary hearing. But 10 A.M., the scheduled time, came and passed as Schwartzmann and another attorney, Carol Kolinchak, huddled at the end of a third-floor hallway with city deputy attorney Joe DiRosa. The city had backed down late the previous night, after a round of calls between lawyers and police: the fee would be cut by two-thirds.

Jackson walked outside the courthouse to the grassy square, and stood in front of a statue of Henry Clay, the statesman known as the "Great Compromiser." The standoff between the clubs had attracted local media attention, so there were camera crews and a small crowd awaiting her. "The Original Pigeontown Steppers will be parading this Easter," she said with a raised fist and a broad smile. "We're here to proclaim that we are reclaiming the city streets. We're going forth."

It was a qualified victory; the clubs would thereafter pay around two thousand dollars for permit fees. But it was a victory nonetheless. Three days later, after a brief rain subsided and clouds parted for a spot of sun, the Original Pigeontown Steppers made their way out of Stanley U's Lounge in suits, fedoras, and sashes of powder blue offset by pale yellow. Joe Henry, the club's president, rolled his wheelchair, bedecked with feathers that matched his suit, onto the street. "They're trying to keep us down, no doubt. But people count on this. They need it now more than ever. So here we are."



### Happy Birthday, Katrina

There were fewer media folk in New Orleans gearing up for the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina than for the first commemoration. Maybe that was a good thing—the first time around most locals seemed genuinely annoyed by the drop-in presence of so many cameras and commentators, many of whom knew little of the city and craved simply a good setup shot and a ticket out of town. I remember one Ninth Ward family who stood by and watched as an anchorwoman held her microphone in front of their devastated home: "The producer said he doesn't want us in the picture," the father told me, his baby in his arms.

Those living in New Orleans in 2007—by even optimistic estimates, around 60 percent of the pre-Katrina population level, or nearly 300,000—hardly needed to mark calendars. Every day was an anniversary, a stark reminder of nature's wrath and more so of the distinctly un-

natural disasters of levee failures, insurance shortfalls, and a tide of bureaucratic red tape that rivaled even the water's ability to stall lives. Two years after the storm, only about one-third of those residents approved for their "Road Home" awards from the Louisiana Recovery Authority had received payments. The number of press on hand for the second anniversary may have been down compared to the previous year, but the politicians were out in force. And there was much discussion, a good deal of it in conferences with impressive, even hopeful, titles, such as Lieutenant Governor Mitch Landrieu's "World Cultural Economy Forum." For all the talk and all the music of the past few days in New Orleans, the most emphatic statement about post-Katrina life, and particularly about cultural economy, was silence.

A Sunday Musicians Solidarity Second Line found members of the Treme Brass Band and some two-dozen other musicians, instruments in hand, assembled for a parade. At a typical second line, a brass band or two plays, and supporters follow along, dancing and clapping out rhythms. But this time not a note was played, not a step danced. The message was clear: New Orleans's musicians need better support, lest the music that lends this city its identity one day fall silent.

That Sunday a slow, steady rain lent dramatic drips to homemade signs that read: "Living Wages = Living Music," "Imagine a Silent NOLA," "Keep Our Story Alive." But the procession never exploded into music. When it reached the French Quarter's Jackson Square, Musicians Union president "Deacon" John Moore, a guitarist who played on several seminal R&B hits during his career, addressed the small crowd. "It ain't easy in the Big Easy," he said. "Our musicians are suffering. We hate to come out here like this but we have no alternative."

Benny Jones Sr., the drummer and founder of the Treme Brass Band, had been making music in New Orleans for some fifty years. "It's always been a bit of a struggle," he said, "but now it's become a losing proposition." At issue were the pressures of a hard-hit tourism industry, the increased cost of living in New Orleans, and the need among musicians for better pay and some meaningfully nurturing initiatives during tough post-Katrina times. Several nonprofit organizations—most pointedly a dynamic new one, Sweet Home New Orleans—had risen to embrace the latter task. But while the need remained daunting, the flow of contributions had begun to ebb: An economic downturn, combined with something casually referred to as "Katrina fatigue" had set in. The director of

Sweet Home, Jordan Hirsch, estimated that of the approximately 4,500 working musicians and others in the New Orleans cultural community, "about a third are back and doing OK, a third have yet to return, and a third are here but in unstable situations."

"Historically, musicians have been taken for granted here because it's so common and pervasive," said Scott Aiges, a director at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation and a former city government official, who walked along the parade route. "It's such an intrinsic part of our culture that, when we hear a brass band it's just another day." Aiges suggested solutions to some musicians' problems, ranging from promotional strategies to zoning ordinances, and especially tax and other incentives to those who employ musicians. The next night, in between his sets at the Snug Harbor club, Ellis Marsalis told me: "Those ideas are all well-meaning. But, see, New Orleans culture developed out of a hustle and will always be a hustle." That hustle won't suffice, it seems, during the slow crawl of recovery: Maybe some public policy *was* in order. Maybe something was in danger of disappearing below some forbidding economic red line, something that would be missed in deep but also largely unacknowledged ways.

I remembered something said at Landrieu's Cultural Economy Forum, by the ambassador of Grenada, Denis G. Antoine: "New Orleans is a perception. When we talk about safety, how safe do you feel? It's not just about crime, it's about how safe do you feel to be you?"



### Hymns, Dirges, and Misdemeanors

In the fall, second-line season kicked up again. Despite the uneasy compromise in the case against the city and the increased permit fees, social aid and pleasure club members were happy just to get on with their weekly parades. Brass band musicians breathed a sigh of relief. They needed the work and, maybe as much as the money, they needed to be out in the streets. It was a brief pause between battles.

On the evening of October 1, 2007, two dozen of New Orleans's top brass band players and roughly two hundred followers began a processions for Kerwin James, a tuba player with the New Birth Brass Band who had passed away on September 26. They were "bringing him down" with a funeral procession that began as a dirge and ended with up-tempo release each night until his Saturday burial. But the bittersweet tradition

ended just plain bitter—with the trombonist Glen David Andrews and his brother, snare drummer Derrick Tabb, led away in handcuffs. Twenty police cars converged near the corner of North Robertson and St. Philip streets, in the heart of Tremé. In the end, it looked more like the scene of a murder than misdemeanors.

"The police told us, 'If we hear one more note, we'll arrest the whole band,'" Tabb said two nights later, outside a fundraiser to help defray the costs of James's burial at Ray's Boom Boom Room on Frenchmen Street. "Well, we did stop playing," Andrews said. "We were singing, lifting our voices to God. You gonna tell me that's wrong too?" Ellis Joseph, drummer of the Free Agents band, was also in the Monday night procession. He walked over, leaned against Andrews's shoulder. "They came in a swarm," he said, tracing a circle with his hands. "Like we had AK-47s. But we only had instruments."

The police hadn't shut down a tourist show. They had cut short a familiar hymn, "I'll Fly Away," during a procession for one of Tremé's own. Funeral processions are an essential element of New Orleans culture, and the impromptu variety—honoring the passing of someone of distinction, especially a musician—are a time-honored tradition. For this tight-knit neighborhood community, the police had stomped on something sacred, on home turf. Tremé had a long history of embattlement. Here was one more chapter.

The New Orleans Police Department spokesman Joe Narcisse claimed the department was simply acting on a neighborhood resident's phoned-in complaint to a 911 line. He maintained that such processions require permits. Technically, they do, according to a statute on the books since 1925. But no one in Tremé, not even the regular beat cops, could recall enforcement of this regulation. Beyond all that, it was the scale and intensity, the callousness, of the police response that angered the musicians and followers. Katy Reckdahl, a reporter for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* who lives on North Rampart Street, Tremé's southern border, had rushed to catch up with the Monday-evening procession after her two-year-old son Hector heard tubas in the distance. What she found was flood of patrol cars, sirens blaring. Her front-page, full-banner-headline report two days later described police running into the crowd, grabbing at horn players' mouthpieces, and trying to seize drumsticks out of hands. "The confrontations spurred cries in the neighborhood about over-reaction and disproportionate enforcement by the police, who had often turned a blind

eye to the traditional memorial ceremonies," she wrote. "Still others say the incident is a sign of a greater attack on the cultural history of the old city neighborhood by well-heeled newcomers attracted to Tremé by the very history they seem to threaten."

It's unclear who called the police that night. Some locals pointed to the green house on North Robertson Street with shutters that seem always closed. In any case, it was easy to sense the difference, longtime residents say, between North Robertson before and after the storm. With its proximity to the French Quarter and historic architecture, Tremé, most of which did not flood, had become newly attractive to homebuyers given the city's shrunken post–Hurricane Katrina housing stock. Home prices in Tremé had risen more than 30 percent since 2006. Meanwhile, as in most of New Orleans, rents had even more sharply increased. Laureen Lentz, who owned several properties in the neighborhood, had pumped up Tremé's development potential on her New Orleans Renovation blog with a breathless June posting: "Since Katrina, the Historic Faubourg Tremé Association has gathered a lot of steam. Our neighborhood is changing as people have begun to realize that this area is prime, non-flooded real estate. . . . So much is happening in Tremé, it's hard to convince people that aren't here. You have to see it to believe it."

To many in city administration, such transformation was one answer to the crime and drug problems that had plagued the neighborhood since the 1980s. To longtime Tremé residents, the rapid change was the latest in a series of clear threats to tradition. The intensity of the police response during the Kerwin James procession prompted a second line of print voices, so to speak, in the *Times-Picayune*'s pages.

"If somebody is blowing a horn in Tremé and somebody else is calling the police," wrote columnist Jarvis DeBerry, "only one of those people is disturbing the peace, and it isn't the one playing the music." Nick Spitzer, creator of the public-radio program *American Routes*, wrote in an op-ed piece, "In a city where serious crime often goes unprosecuted and unpunished, jazz funerals make the streets momentarily sacred and safer." The columnist Lolis Eric Elie wrote, "New Orleans Police Department declared a resumption of its war against our city's culture."

The day following the skirmish, discussions between community leaders and First District police captain Louis Colin yielded a temporary agreement. That evening, Andrews, Tabb and other musicians were back on those same streets, leading another procession, this time protected by

a permit, which some residents viewed as a disappointing compromise. "We don't need anyone's approval to live our lives," muttered Al Harris, who lived his whole life in Tremé, as he followed the musicians down North Robertson. He still couldn't believe that someone had dialed 911. He stopped and turned. "What are these people thinking? It's like if you move into beachfront property and then decide that you don't like sand or water."

The procession wove through the neighborhood, culminating on that grassy lot. Andrews put down his trombone and sang "I'll Fly Away." Tabb snapped out soft rolls on his snare. A tight circle surrounded the musicians. A middle-aged black woman in a blue housecoat turned to the man next to her. "They say they want to stop this?" she asked softly. "They will never stop this."



### Ritual Matters

The Sunday before Mardi Gras in New Orleans in 2008, Donald Harrison Jr. lay on the living-room floor of his mother's house in the Ninth Ward, cutting leopard-print fur in a pattern as he spoke. Nearby, a sofa and chair were covered with beads and rhinestones, along with ostrich and turkey feathers that had been dyed a golden yellow.

In other parts of the country that year, February 5 marked Super Tuesday. All attention was focused on would-be elected leaders with practiced battle cries, competing to prove themselves fierce and attractive. But in New Orleans it was Fat Tuesday. Uptown, in the limelight, the various well-publicized krewe parades (a throng that included Hulk Hogan, that year's King of Bacchus) lorded over the city, riding high on floats and tossing down beads. But on less-traveled streets, more in the shadows and announced mostly on a need-to-know basis, Mardi Gras Indian chiefs, possessors of strictly inherited thrones, asserted their authority. Dressed in eight-foot-tall, six-foot-wide feathered and beaded suits and accompanied by "wild men," "spy boys," and others, they were introduced with drumbeats and chants, lending voice and hope to New Orleans residents who'd been all but ignored during the presidential primary season. Like the candidates, the big chiefs competed with words. And in a ritual that once frequently did turn violent, they battled to win hearts and minds, using their elaborate suits to "kill 'em with pretty." The presidential candidates were selling change, but in New Orleans, a city all but ignored by that lot

(except for John Edwards, who stood in front of the Ninth Ward's Musician's Village as he dropped out of the race), the message from these local leaders was continuity. Midday, Victor Harris of Fi-Yi-Yi showed up in front of the home of Joyce Montana, the widow of Tootie Montana, the late "chief of chiefs." Around 3 P.M., Darryl Montana, Tootie and Joyce's son, came out of Joyce's front door, looking regal in his tall, broad, lavender feathered suit, which rippled gently in the growing breeze as he headed up to Claiborne Avenue, beneath the overpass for I-10, where Indians generally convene on Mardi Gras—"Under the Bridge," they call it. That phrase held a different meaning just then, as it did splashed across the cover of the *Gambit*, headlining a piece about the growing encampment of some two hundred homeless underneath the freeway, just a small portion of an estimated twelve thousand cast-out residents. And not far from view on Claiborne was the darkened façade of the Lafitte Housing Projects, its doors and windows covered with steel plates.

It seemed a cruel indignity, some mash-up of Dickens and Orwell, when, five days before Christmas, 2007, the New Orleans City Council unanimously approved a HUD-ordered plan to tear down some 4,500 units of public housing. I was in New York, watching CNN as residents assembled outside by barricades and police lines. "If you know New Orleans, you'll know how dilapidated these housing developments are," said anchorwoman Kyra Phillips. "They've been crime-ridden, very popular for drug-running. . . . According to the mayor, this is an effort to clean up the city, have better housing for folks."

Meanwhile, like some bizarre B-roll footage, we saw a live shot of New Orleans residents being turned away with pepper spray; one woman fell to the ground after being Tasered. But we heard only Phillips. The residents were voiceless, as they'd been in the debate about demolition and rebuilding of public housing in a city hard-pressed for affordable homes. On Mardi Gras morning, Gerard Lewis, Big Chief of the Black Eagles, led his tribe in a prayer outside the B. W. Cooper projects—once their coming-out spot, then slated for destruction. Later in the week, after Super Tuesday's primary results proved inconclusive, New Orleans made its way into the election year discourse. "Suddenly, candidates are paying attention," read the subhead to Thursday's front-page coverage in the *Times-Picayune*. Barack Obama spoke at Tulane University that day. He made eloquent mention of slaves at Congo Square and their "dances of impossible joy," but he didn't say a word about public housing.

The Sunday before Mardi Gras, Donald Harrison had told me he was going to wear his suit, but that he would stay close to home, holding court as it were. He wasn't going to take to the streets, to "come out." I told him I didn't believe him. "Wasn't ritual important?" I asked.

We waited and waited, a group of us, in front of the Holy Faith Temple Baptist Church on Governor Nicholls Street. Finally, near dusk, Harrison arrived, driving a yellow Penske truck filled with the parts of his suit. As the sky darkened, he made his entrance from church to street, arms folded, concealing the detailed beadwork in the image of his father, feathers rippling as he walked, chants and beats following him. He looked spectacular, and moved tall and proud.

"So you came out after all," I said.

"Yeah," he shot back. "Ritual matters."

### Muddy Homecoming

Above all else it was a homecoming: The Neville Brothers performed at the annual New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival in 2008 for the first time since Hurricane Katrina. And there was more good news: the festival returned to its full seven-day schedule for the first time since 2005. Still more: though the heavy rains of the first weekend made a muddy mess of the Fair Grounds infield, they didn't dampen spirits or attendance much. According to event officials, nearly 400,000 people attended.

Given the emotional heft of their return, the Nevilles were the big story. Their presence built throughout the fest's final weekend: first Art, in his debut solo set, inviting Aaron up to the stage; then, Aaron, bringing many in a packed gospel tent to tears, his saxophonist brother Charles at his side; finally, all four—Art, Aaron, Cyril, and Charles—together on the Acura stage to close the festival's final day. Before that performance, the producer Quint Davis spoke of "families being torn apart, brothers separated from brothers all over New Orleans." "The Neville family's coming back together," Art said from the stage. The crowd roared. The four reprised the three decades of hits that made them such beloved stars in the first place.

It was an important symbol, no doubt. Though Charles had lived in Massachusetts for more than a decade, Aaron, Art, and Cyril all lived in New Orleans before Katrina. These brothers had been separated from each other—and from the city that identified so powerfully with them. I

was struck by Aaron's son, Ivan Neville, on *Sing Me Back Home*, a CD by displaced all-star musicians recorded in Austin, Texas, six weeks after the storm; covering John Fogerty's Creedence Clearwater Revival hit, Ivan snarled, "I ain't no fortunate son!"—and meant it. (If a Neville wasn't entitled by birth, who in New Orleans was?)

As for the city's overall population, July 2005 census reports had estimated a pre-Katrina population of some 450,000—a little more than the total of Jazz Fest attendees. Estimates from the Greater New Orleans Data Center, based on an analysis of homes receiving postal service, yielded a 2008 population of 325,000. Yet it was impossible to determine how many within this total were new residents, and there were no reliable figures for former residents of New Orleans who still wished to return home. One thing that was clear: the changing population of the city had political implications. An April 24 *Times-Picayune* piece by Michelle Krupa cited a study by Ed Chervenak, a political scientist from the University of New Orleans, based on voter turnout in the 2003 and 2007 gubernatorial elections. The results, Krupa wrote, "confirm what election-watchers have suspected since Hurricane Katrina: the number of voters in the New Orleans area has fallen sharply, with African-Americans and registered Democrats losing the most ground." According to Christine Day, chairwoman of the Political Science department of the University of New Orleans, "It has really important implications for the redrawing of districts—congressional districts and all the way down."

These facts and figures were likely lost on those who charged from stage to stage, softshell crab po' boy in hand, at the Fair Grounds, the horse-racing track that transforms into a music stadium once each year. Yet in many ways, politics were in the air during The New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival Presented by Shell (as it was officially titled)—literally, at one point. While the Neville Brothers played the Acura stage, a plane circled above the Fair Grounds towing a banner: "Shell, Hear the Music. Fix the Coast You Broke."

Stevie Wonder flat-out endorsed Barack Obama's campaign at the start of his show. He decried the racism that could threaten the senator's run for the White House, then segued into "Love's in Need of Love Today," biting down hard on the line, "Hate's goin' 'round." And how's this for a slogan Obama's campaign manager didn't think of? When Mardi Gras Indians Bo Dollis and the Wild Magnolias reached the climax of their Jazz and Heritage stage set, an election-year twist on an Indian chant, best

known via a 1965 recording by The Dixie Cups, could be heard a football field away: "Iko, Iko, Obama!"

Perhaps no song speaks to the Katrina experience as well as Randy Newman's "Louisiana, 1927." Written more than thirty years ago, the tune has become a contemporary anthem, its chorus—"Louisiana, they're trying to wash us away"—bearing new relevance. Yet it was Newman's "A Few Words in Defense of Our Country" that elicited the most knowing chill, especially through its closing verse:

> The end of an empire is messy at best
> And this empire is ending
> Like all the rest
> Like the Spanish Armada adrift on the sea
> We're adrift in the land of the brave
> And the home of the free.
> Goodbye. Goodbye. Goodbye.

If trumpeter Terence Blanchard's statements at the festival's jazz tent were political, they were wordlessly so, as he performed selections from his Grammy-winning CD, *A Tale of God's Will*, with his band and members of the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra. The music, drawn from Blanchard's score to Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*, called up indelible images of Katrina's aftermath and their associated emotions. Unlike several New Orleans musicians who left the city for fame and for good—Armstrong included—Blanchard moved back to his hometown in 1995, having established his reputation in New York. By now he's a defining voice of modern mainstream jazz and one of few jazz musicians to find a career composing for film. His is the musical voice of Mr. Lee's films for nearly two decades. One riveting scene of "When the Levees Broke," which Blanchard scored, showed the trumpeter escorting his mother back to her home, where he lived most of his childhood. She broke down crying in the doorway when she realized everything inside has been destroyed. Suddenly, the story being told was Mr. Blanchard's own. Yet when he sat down to translate his compositions for "Levees" into a suite for jazz band and orchestra, he heard only silence. "That's my memory of that visit to my mother's house," he told me. "No cars. No birds, no insects. Nothing. But the silence finally broke, and I started to hear voices, and the stories those voices told. I tried to give the listener an idea of all this." At the jazz tent, as on his recording, violins voiced the storm's fury, woodwinds the

foreboding calm of its wake, his horn the anguished cries and later rage of those left stranded. Blanchard's requiem contains tightly composed passages but also moments during which he pushes his trumpet beyond its comfortable range. Not screeches, exactly—nothing close to Abbey Lincoln's screams on Max Roach's 1960 "We Insist! Freedom Now Suite," but angrier and more daring than any of his previous work. And, like Roach's music almost two generations ago, meant to make a point.

Among the Mardi Gras Indians at Jazz Fest, I noticed Eddie "Big Easy" Vanison, "gang flag" of the Hardhead Hunters, passing by with an elaborate suit, including one embroidered patch that could have been a news story. "Chocolate City," it read along the top. Underneath was a detailed image: a sign reading "Club Tremé," in memory of one among many long-gone neighborhood venues; a bleeding body with numbered shell casings alongside; a police cruiser and yellow police tape; Mardi Gras Indians and neighborhood kids on the sides, watching it all. In context, amid the other patches on Vanison's suit—second lines and the Superdome, among other things—it was just one element of a panorama of New Orleans life. "But it was a piece that needed to be shown," he told me later, "and that we live with."

At Glen David Andrews's performance, not long after the trombonist drifted in and out of the lyrics to Dr. John's "Right Place, Wrong Time," he dedicated the hymn "I'll Fly Away" to Kerwin James. He wasn't simply honoring a dear departed friend and beloved musician: He was referencing the evening of October 1. By then, the charges against Andrews and Tabb—"parading without a permit" and "disturbing the peace by tumultuous manner"—had been dropped, but the ante was still upped up in the fight over the city's culture. With his tribute hymn at Jazz Fest, Andrews was completing that cut-short ritual—free, onstage, employed, and empowered.

Mac Rebennack, best known as Dr. John, offered up a few songs from "City That Care Forgot," his artful 2008 rant of an album that took on a wide range of issues—from disappearing wetlands to oil-industry greed, the Iraq war to the botched response to Katrina (and connected the dots between these problems). Rebennack's deepest ire was saved for recent challenges to the culture he grew up with. He drew more than a few knowing nods with his lyrics to "My People Need a Second Line," which referenced both the October Tremé arrests in particular and the embattled parade culture in general. "You know it ain't right/ to charge people for

a second line," he sang. "It's something spiritual/ ought to be kept out of politics/ Sending 20 squad cars to stop a second line / sending musicians to jail instead of stopping crime."

Quint Davis once told me he thought of his Jazz and Heritage Festival as "this big soul-generating battery." Surely the $300 million in estimated revenue the seven-day event generated in the city didn't hurt. And apart from the national pop acts on Jazz Fest's 2008 bill—from Al Green to Tim McGraw to Billy Joel—there was a dazzling range of homegrown artistry, the breadth and depth of which was stunning. The musicians and Mardi Gras Indians and second-liners at Jazz Fest who were born and raised in New Orleans told the city's truth beyond the Fair Grounds fences, for those who cared to listen thoughtfully. And it was even possible that something necessary, perhaps instructive, some basic feeling that locals have come understand, was conveyed during that first weekend, when the rains came sudden and hard, shutting things down for hours: we all had to slog through the mud just to get where we were going.



### Yes We Can Can

The night before the 2008 Democratic Convention in Denver, Allen Toussaint played "Yes We Can Can" for a party filled with delegates. The song sounded tailor-made for the Obama campaign. But he wrote it in New Orleans, in 1970, inspired by a different era of change. No wonder. New Orleans musicians have for more than a century anticipated and articulated just what this country needs.

Toussaint was just one in a dazzling lineup of Crescent City musicians that kicked off the Democratic National Committee's week. The presence ran yet deeper when Margie Perez, a singer who lost her New Orleans home to Katrina but had since moved back, spoke from the convention stage. But Denver's resonant notes turned dissonant when some of these musicians moved on to Minneapolis for a Republican National Committee party the following week. How could Tab Benoit's "Voices of the Wetlands" possibly harmonize with John McCain's "drill here, drill now" refrain?

The larger questions posed by these convention-related performances reflected the paradox surrounding New Orleans culture even in its hometown. Did the musicians make a statement of identity tied to political pur-

pose (the needs of communities that created and nurtured this culture)? Or were they merely a traveling "Crescent City" revue? New Orleans had figured into 2008's election season as a reminder of the Bush administration's bungled, uncaring response to Katrina. Yet amid so much talk of hope and change, on this anniversary of disaster, many in New Orleans hoped for a change of policy—the kind of federal assistance that can make a dent in crises of housing, public safety, education, health care, and levee protection. It made sense for musicians to kick-start that conversation. How closely an Obama administration would be listening and whether it could engage in a productive exchange remained an open question. But these musicians had something of substance to contribute to and to ask of his platform. Also, not that Obama needed the help, such a focus might have energized his theme, adding rhythmic emphasis: Yes we can can.



**Reality TV**

"Price was twelve, bruh.'

"Say, bruh. Them twelve hundred was for eight pieces."

A deal was going down, yeah. Just not the sort we're used to witnessing between black men on a television show set in an American city. Certainly not a David Simon drama on HBO.

Yet before even a word of dialogue was uttered in the very first episode of *Treme*, Simon's HBO series set in post-Katrina New Orleans, came clues. A saxophonist licked, then adjusted, his reed. Slide oil was applied to a trombone. Soldiers and cops stood guard. Two little kids danced to a faint parade rhythm, which was soon supplanted by the bass booming from an SUV. An unseen trumpet sounded an upward figure, followed by a tuba's downward groove.

Back to that deal: one guy delivering those lines, an imposing-looking sort, was Gralen Banks, an actor who is also a member of the Black Men of Labor, one of some three dozen social aid and pleasure clubs operating these days in New Orleans; the other, diminutive and serious-looking, is Keith Frazier, the actual bass drummer and cofounder, with his brother Phil, of the Rebirth Brass Band. They were working out a price for eight musicians to march in and play a four-hour parade in a shattered economy. The scene recreated that first second-line parade after Katrina, the memorial for chef Austin Leslie. This was New Orleans, three months

past the floods. The hulking, extinct refrigerators and carcasses of former houses looked familiar from news reports, as to some degree did the horns and drums. But now foreground and background were flipped.

The danger and dislocation in the streets of New Orleans equals if not surpasses that depicted by *The Wire*, Simon's finely detailed evocation of his hometown, Baltimore, as told through the intersecting lives of cops, drug dealers, politicians, teachers, and journalists through five HBO seasons. But there's also devastating beauty in New Orleans of a type neither found nor meaningfully understood anywhere else. Whereas *The Wire*'s title referenced a police wiretap on a drug ring, suggesting as well unseen links between street action and the corridors of power, *Treme*, which debuted on HBO in April, 2010, plugged directly into the city's indigenous culture.

The pilot episode's parade under way, another negotiation took place, this one setting off what became a running comic bit: with a deft mixture of desperation, charm, and speed, Antoine Batiste, the freelance musician played by Wendell Pierce, talked down a cab fare. That score settled, he rushed up to the band and began to blow his own commentary on the tune, Rebirth's "Feel Like Funkin' It Up." It was, in all likelihood, the first opening monologue by a central character in a television series delivered wordlessly, on trombone.

In early March, at his production office in New Orleans's Lower Garden District, Simon was struggling with the fine points of a later episode's script. He was reluctant to draw a strong connection between his former series and *Treme*. Yet he described a natural progression of thought. "*The Wire* was a tract about how political power and money rout themselves," he said. "But there was no place to reference on some level why it matters, emotionally, that America has been given over to those things. This show is about culture, and it's about what was at stake. Because apart from culture, on some empirical level, it does not matter if all New Orleans washes into the Gulf, and if everyone from New Orleans ended up living in Houston or Baton Rouge or Atlanta. Culture is what brought this city back. Not government. There was and has been no initiative by government at any level to contemplate in all seriousness the future of New Orleans. Yet New Orleans is coming back, and it's sort of done it one second line at a time, one crawfish étouffée at a time, one moment at a time."

*Right—that's what I've been trying to say*, I grumbled to no one in particular. I grew fascinated not just by Simon's earnest focus, his show's

often hip evocation of the city, and the savvy musical choices of his music supervisor, Blake Leyh, as well as by—since *Treme* is a TV drama, not a documentary—the confluence of fact and fiction. In Sidney Bechet's memoir, *Treat It Gentle*, the late, great clarinetist's real grandfather is supplanted by Omar, a fictional figure based on a folk tale, all the better to convey stirring truths about the true origins of New Orleans jazz. On most evenings in the French Quarter, tourists gather on street corners as dubiously credentialed docents lead "Haunted History" tours. Real and imagined intermingle pointedly in New Orleans, in all walks of life.

And sometimes, real and imagined overlap in ironic fashion. There's a scene in episode 3 of the premiere season of *Treme*, wherein Pierce's Batiste walks through the French Quarter after playing at a Bourbon Street Strip joint—a gig he took reluctantly, out of need in a makeshift, postflood scene. He's tired, maybe a little drunk, and carrying his horn, sans case. He pauses in front of two street musicians on the corner of Royal and St. Peter streets, in front of Rouses Market. Suddenly energized by a version of "Ghost of a Chance," played by a pretty young violinist (Annie, played by Lucia Micarelli) and a gangly young pianist (Sonny, played by Michiel Huisman). He sings a bit of the lyric, nods in approval of Annie's improvisation, then turns and half-staggers into the night. His trombone grazes the side-view mirror of a police car parked nearby. Soon, in a rush, he's up against a wall, his instrument slammed to the ground by an officer. A minor beat-down and arrest follow.

Simon clearly meant to highlight the pressure-cooker atmosphere of New Orleans and especially within an undermanned and overburdened police force in December 2005, as well as to foreshadow what would become on inevitable theme coursing through his series: the tensions between the city's culture bearers and its powers that be.

If that scene had played out in real life, in June 2010, it might have gone like this: police officers approach Annie and Sonny to inform them that playing music after 8 P.M. is violation of a city ordinance. They ask the two musicians to read and sign their names and dates of birth on documents acknowledging receipt of a notice stating, "effective immediately, the New Orleans Police Department will be enforcing the below-listed ordinances": Sec. 30–1456, prohibiting street entertainment between 8 P.M. and 6 A.M. within the entertainment section of Bourbon Street, from Canal to St. Ann Streets; and Sec. 66–205, which says, "It shall be unlawful for any person to play musical instruments on public rights-of-

way between the hours of 8:00 p.m. and 9:00 a.m.," unless protected by special permit.

In the real New Orleans, on June 12—as the premiere season of *Treme* drew to its close, having celebrated street musicians and brass bands of New Orleans as something like heroes—just such notice was served on the To Be Continued Brass Band. They'd set up shop, just as they'd been doing since 2003, on the corner of Bourbon Street and Canal, in front of the Foot Locker store. According to statement issued by the new police chief, Ronal Serpas: "The New Orleans Police Department's 8th District has for many years, and as recently as within the last several weeks, received numerous complaints from residents of the French Quarter noting that musical street performers are violating existing ordinances. These complaints have also resulted in repeated request for enforcement from the NOPD."

The irony couldn't have been more pointed. The New Orleans Convention and Visitor's Bureau had just inaugurated a new series of television advertisements, urging viewers to "book your New Orleans reservations right now." At one point, trumpeter Irvin Mayfield looked straight into the camera to say: "Right now in New Orleans, you can hear great jazz in the streets of the French Quarter." Behind him was dark of night.

In 2007, a crowd of eight thousand had followed the Hot 8 Brass Band through the streets of New Orleans to make a political point. By June 23, 2010, more than thirteen thousand signed on as Facebook followers of the page, "Don't Stop the Music. Let New Orleans Musicians Play!" which was created by TBC's manager, Lisa Palumbo. In a brief interview, posted on YouTube, the TBC trumpeter Sean Roberts described his frustration. "What they're doing is slowly but surely killing the New Orleans tradition," he said. "I learned how to play trumpet on this corner."

I first met Roberts in 2007, when he sat in the back of the Sound Café, studying a collaboration between the Hot 8 Brass Band and clarinetist Michael White. White had lost not just his home in the flood of 2005 but also a personal archive of more than 4,000 books and 5,000 recordings, many obscure; transcriptions of music from Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, Sidney Bechet and other jazz pioneers; vintage clarinets dating from the 1880s to the 1930s; photographs, concert programs, and other memorabilia, including used banjo strings and reeds tossed off by early twentieth-century musical heroes.

Yet even before Katrina, White had sensed a gradual fading away of the

musical tradition he came up within—brass-band players clad in white shirts, ties and black-banded caps, playing everything from hymns and marches to blues and jazz, always with swinging rhythms, complex group improvisation, and specific three-trumpet harmonies. His newfound, post-Katrina link to the Hot 8, who were older than the guys in the TBC band but still of the contemporary scene, signaled a tightening of ranks and renewed sense of purpose among brass band members within a rebuilding city. Bennie Pete, the Hot 8's leader and tuba player, had told me that White had provided "answers to questions about this tradition I'd never thought to ask." Roberts explained to me later that he "wanted in on whatever was being passed along."

"There's a feeling among many that some of our older cultural institutions, like parades and jazz funerals, are in the way of progress and don't fit in the new vision of New Orleans," said White, who is also a Xavier University professor. "That they should only be used in a limited way to boost the image of New Orleans, as opposed to being real, viable aspects of our lives."

At her law office in a MidCity shotgun house, Mary Howell—whose work inspired a character in *Treme*, civil rights attorney Toni Bernette—had recalled for me how she began defending musicians on a regular basis more than three decades ago. A nearby picture frame held Matt Rose's 1996 photograph, which ran in the *Times-Picayune*, of musicians marching after one such incident: There, next to a ten-year-old Troy Andrews (better known as "Trombone Shorty" these days) on tuba, is a teenage snare drummer wearing a sign: "I Was Arrested for Playing Music." The French Quarter, where tourists regularly get their first encounter with New Orleans music, has long been contested space, she explained. The ordinances covering music in New Orleans, some based on decibel levels, others based on geography or time of day or night, she said, are "vague and overbroad enough to be ridiculous. They're not enforceable, and they're technically unconstitutional." Add to this, Howell explains, that in 1974 the city passed a zoning ordinance that actually prohibits live entertainment in New Orleans, save for spots that are either grandfathered in or specially designated as exceptions. The very idea is mind-boggling—a city whose image is largely derived from its live entertainment essentially outlawing public performance through noise, nuisance, and zoning ordinances.

By 2010, New Orleans had become a new city, in quite a number of

ways, one being the absence of former mayor C. Ray Nagin and the presence of a new one, Mitch Landrieu, who, as lieutenant governor of Louisiana, made "cultural economy" his signature issue. By the end of June, City Hall and a newly elected city council were sending out signals of a desire to compromise about the issue at hand surrounding the TBC band and other musicians, and to revisit these longstanding yet troublesome ordinances.

It was moment in which attention was turned to the Gulf Coast, focused on the continuing disaster caused by BP's failed oil well—to the potential loss of an industry, a way of life, and of precious, long-abused wetlands. Trumpeter Terrell Batiste, a member of the Hot 8 band who had begun playing regularly with the TBC band too, told Katy Reckdahl of the *Times Picayune*, "People come to New Orleans for two things: food and music. Now the oil in the Gulf is threatening one of them and the city wants to take the other one away."

A thought rattled around my head, inchoate at best: since so much of the culture that defines New Orleans—from its Mardi Gras Indians to second-line parades to the city's version of jazz—developed in some subversive way, usually in opposition to authority, maybe this tension—this sense of being put upon, threatened, and prosecuted (if not persecuted)—is necessary to the thing itself. No. I'm not ready to accept that, nor did Glen David Andrews, who gathered musicians and supporters in front of TV cameras in June to apply pressure to city hall.

On August 29, 2010, the fifth anniversary of the floods that resulted from the levee failures following Hurricane Katrina, some people in New Orleans celebrated renewal. Some mourned loss. Others touted progress or lamented lingering inequity. Still others sought just another day, a regular one, in the city they call home. Nearly everywhere, the word "resilience" popped up. A poster stapled to lampposts in some neighborhoods quoted activist and attorney Tracie Washington: "Stop calling me resilient. Because every time you say, 'Oh, they're so resilient,' that means you can do something else to me. I am not resilient." Over in Armstrong Park, a statue of Louis Armstrong stood bound by ropes and secured by sandbags amid torn-up concrete and weeds, its base rusted and damaged—the unfortunate consequence of a renovation project gone sour that had been initiated by then-mayor Nagin. Both statue and plaza were due for repair, but the image was apt: In a city that has known devastation and govern-

ment incompetence, could a celebrated homegrown culture once again find firm footing?

New Orleans jazz culture will endure, of that I'm convinced. It won't be precisely what it was prior to August 29, 2005. How could it, with rents doubled, public housing razed, and so many still yet or never to return? Still, I remember trumpeter Kermit Ruffins, playing "Skokiaan" at Vaughan's, not long after the flood. ("The saddest gig I ever played," he told me, "but also the happiest, because we were coming back.") And John Boutté at DBA on Frenchmen Street, singing Stevie Wonder's "You Haven't Done Nothin'," biting down hard on the line "We would not care to wake up to the nightmare that's becoming real life." And hundreds, following brass bands through ravaged streets, always for pleasure but just then to assert an uncertain right to return.

When I first got to New Orleans after the flood, I was stunned by just how much had been destroyed. And by how little I knew. I'd been writing about jazz for twenty years. Yet I was profoundly ignorant about what it means to have a living music, one that flows from and embeds everyday life. I knew but had not yet meaningfully felt the link to something fundamentally African, transplanted via the enslaved who passed through much of this hemisphere, many of whom, come Sundays, drummed and danced in Congo Square, in what is now Tremé. I keep thinking about the language of that lawsuit brought by the social aid and pleasure clubs, invoking First Amendment rights. "Should the law not be enjoined," the complaint stated, "there is very little doubt that plaintiff's cultural tradition will cease to exist." Just because something will not die doesn't mean you have to keep on trying to kill it. Nothing has ceased. Yet nothing will ever be the same.