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Music of New Orleans

"ARE YOU ALL TOGETHER?"

"Today we are."

Jazz forms in the park.

It was December, and I had arrived in New Orleans the night before, reluctantly, to attend the MLA conference. September 11th had come and gone, and I wasn't sure I wanted to travel; also, the sheer size and impersonality of the MLA were their own disincentive. But there I was, in the city of New Orleans, and on that first morning, turning my back on the conference, I decided to play hooky. I made my way down into the French Quarter, itself just beginning to wake up. The place looked a bit bleached, and some storefront sidewalks were being washed after what must have been a strenuous night. Yet the atmosphere of those low buildings, their wrought-iron balustrades and intimacy with the streets, was unmistakable. Even in the too-early morning, in air suprisingly sharp and cold, my jaded feeling began to lift in a sense of strange enchantment.

I found myself in Jackson Square, with its multiple legacies, Spanish and French, and sought out a bench in the sun. I was in a park of sorts, facing aslant a monument of General Jackson, blotting the view on his horse, when I heard, first, an accordionist, playing in one corner of the square, Cajun style. Then, behind me, a mouth organ, a rampant blues. They were playing separately, and it was a few minutes before I realised how their sounds were wafting, flowing through one another. If you listened to them together, it was jazz; the city beginning to make its music. (Perhaps that was how it began, I thought, when all those sounds arrived here together.) When I wandered across to look, I saw the accordionist playing her instrument in a kind of loping dance, as if possessed by the music she was making. Yet she also smiled at a small child she was playing for.

Then flowing through this was other music, this time what sounded like a jazz ensemble. A band was beginning to form, facing the easy steps of the Cabildo, and I went over to see. The guitarist was the only one sitting down, playing slick acoustic rhythms on a bench. Behind him and to the side were two trombonists, a horn player, and a clarinettist. There was a cardboard box in front, for money. To begin with the crowd was slow, but soon things began to warm up. They played swing, and blues, and songs with the mournful, joyous sounds only a New Orleans band can make: "I went down to St James infirmary."

New musicians arrived to join the group; one by one they seemed to appear out of nowhere. If you happened to look away, sure enough there was someone else playing when you looked back. A tuba player joined, his instrument wrapped copiously with duct tape. The guitarist was the youngest, and the only white musician; he played with half-gloved fingers because of the cold, a cloth cap on his head and a beatific smile. Then an old man arrived, playing bass—superb bass. He wore heavy workboots, blue jeans with three-inch turnups, a sweater with a hood to cover his head, and a second covering with another hood over that. He was unshaven, and bent over almost double as he leaned across the bass, so that you might think he could barely stand up; but his fingers walked up and down the fingerboard as if out for the most ready of saunters.

Then a washboard player arrived. And a female clarinettist, who laid her head back and played dazzling runs to the skies as if the devil were in her feet and God just a few yards above her head. And they played the crowd, laughing, cajoling, interjecting, hustling. The crowd grew and grew, and so did the money in the box—which after a while became a bucket—as they walked it around. Meanwhile, through it all the horn player chainsmoked. He played his solos head down into his instrument, working with one hand only, cigarette dangling smoke in the other. The trombonist belted out the vocals just like Louis Armstrong and even managed to look like him. This, I felt, was how he might have sounded on the streets, with an extraordinary combination of beaming charm, smile, hustle, and survival. I had known

something about all this before, but now it was as if a shutter had shifted almost physically in my mind. There was a story written there that set the American picture in a different light.

I left once, but had to come back, to hear more. The sun was fully up in the sky now, the atmosphere one of joy and celebration; there must have been a crowd of five hundred, transported in the moment they were part of. As for me, I felt simply exhilarated.

Before I left the first time, the clarinettist came by with the bucket, to collect money and to sell her CDs. It was then that I asked her: "Are you all together?" Though I had said it awkwardly, I had meant, are you a band, do you always play with one another?

There was a glint in her eyes as she took some time considering the question in all its ramifications: "Today we are," she said.

I had never really wanted to come to the United States.

When I was a child, along with all my friends I read American comics: Archie and Jughead, Sad Sack, Casper the Friendly Ghost, and the others. On the back pages were adverts for Americana unavailable to us in South Africa: B.B. guns, Schwinn bikes (with their cross-bars shaped like futuristic rocket ships), sneakers. They didn't interest me much: such things seemed to belong to a different life form. If I thought of going anywhere, it was most likely to Australia. At least there they played cricket, and I could see where Don Bradman had edgily patted his bat into the turf as he faced up to Harold Larwood in the infamous bodyline series of 1932. Later, as I came to political and cultural consciousness, America seemed to me to be the Empire: overweening and daunting, a profoundly ambiguous country sometimes dangerous to herself and to others. I remember the shock when, with an almost concrete sense of chronology, I realised that Martin Luther King's march from Selma to Montgomery occurred after the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa. I knew how bad we were: that was a given. But what remained to be done in America?

And here I was, in America through a series of choices and accidents, trying to make sense of it all. In South Africa I had come to terms with a number of realities: my own marginality (understanding too how that can be a positive thing); the imprecision of vision in a distorted society so that every perspective has to be measured and measured again, from every angle. And yet, the clarity and intensity of that life—even in its challenges and contradictions—so that whole lifetimes could be lived in a day, seeking out and always seeking out again an understanding of one's existence. Since I had left, we had had Nelson Mandela (I cast a ballot for the first time in 1994, standing in line in Washington, D.C., an overseas voter). And what did America have? Here I was, back in the belly of power, with an old and recognisable feeling. Perhaps dissidence is the only country of the honest, I had thought to myself in the plane on the way to the conference.

And yet, this glimpse of another America, a possible America whose life pulses beneath the visible surface. How much history, in all its ambiguity and anguish, joy and complexity, is contained in the smile of a Louis Armstrong? How much is there in the music? Music has been the great gift of Africa to America, and America has given it back to the world. Here, in the winter of New Orleans, it spoke to me of something, and of many things at once: of that unofficial America; of links across the globe; of endurance and what it takes to survive; of improvisation in all its manifold forms; of wit, intelligence, and understanding. Understanding even of myself, in that moment, and across my own history.

I walked into a store called Black Arts, drawn by black-and-white photos of the jazz greats in the window: Billie Holiday, John Coltrane, Dexter Gordon. At least, I tried to walk in, but couldn't get the door open. I thought it was locked, but a young African American woman working inside came and opened it for me. "It just needs a push," she said.

I looked at the posters, saw which I liked, and said I might come back on Saturday to get one or more of them. The store also had paintings and drawings in other iconic formats—the sensuality of Josephine Baker, images overly sultry and exotic. But it was the jazz black-and-whites that took my fancy.

The young woman and I spoke a bit, inconsequentialities about New Orleans and its streets, the weather. Then I left, or tried to leave. Inside the store I had my bifocals on, and I am always awkward in my bifocals because I see things split, double, refracted. It's how I see things anyway. I pushed at the door, but again it wouldn't move. Then I realised, and pulled, and it opened.

I turned to look at the young woman, gazing at me with amusement—this intellectual who likes jazz and makes large pronouncements and can't open a door—but also with friendship and, I guessed, warmth.

"It opens inwards," she mouthed through the glass.