

2010

# Traidtional New Orleans Jazz as a Methaphor for American Life

Dr. Michael White  
*Xavier University of Louisiana*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/ia>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

White, Dr. Michael, "Traidtional New Orleans Jazz as a Methaphor for American Life" (2010). *Imagining America*. 6.  
<https://surface.syr.edu/ia/6>

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarship in Action at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Imagining America by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact [surface@syr.edu](mailto:surface@syr.edu).



Traditional New Orleans **Jazz** as  
a Metaphor for **American Life**

by Dr. Michael White  
introduced by Nick Spitzer  
with a response by Adam Bush

Foreseeable Futures #9  
Position Papers from

*Imagining*  
**America**  
*Artists and Scholars in Public Life*

Dear Reader,

In her Introduction to *the ends of performance*, Peggy Phelan writes that performance “is a discipline based on that which disappears, art that can not be preserved or posted. And we know performance knows things worth knowing” (1998: 8). She raises the question of how to illuminate an “event that is gone but still radiating meaning to someone...who is removed in time from its ‘first’ unfolding?” (1998: 9) Our challenge in this *Foreseeable Futures* is, particularly, how to capture in print what took place as a live event for those who were not present at its “first unfolding.”

The occasion for our effort is the keynote at the heart of this *Foreseeable Futures*, delivered by Dr. Michael White at Imagining America’s tenth annual national conference. Entitled “Traditional New Orleans Jazz as a Metaphor for American Life,” Dr. White not only discussed jazz, particularly the traditional New Orleans variety, but also played it on the clarinet, accompanied by Kerry Lewis on the bass, Detroit Brooks on the banjo, and Gregg Stafford on trumpet. We who were at the keynote experienced New Orleans, the place, through Dr. White’s words and the band’s music.

We knew, of course, that bringing this keynote fully to life to a second audience, of readers, would be a distinct challenge, yet one musicians, actors, and dancers face regularly. Certainly, performers in academia are not infrequently in the position of being assessed by people who have not seen them perform, are not well-versed in their aesthetic language, and may not recognize, as Phelan writes above, that “performance knows things worth knowing.” Happily, in the tradition of many past *Foreseeable Futures*, we return to the practice of including a response by another scholar, in this case PAGE (IA’s Publicly Active Graduate Education program) Associate Director Adam Bush, to add a dimension to the written record of the event. And thanks to the generosity of Dr. White’s record label, Basin Street Records, we have inserted the URLs for clips of the music they played. I urge you to read this text within access of the internet so that, as you read, you can listen to the music that so fully captures Dr. White’s points. We are also pleased to include the introduction to Dr. White provided by Nick Spitzer, host of NPR’s *American Routes* at our conference.

Much art also faces a challenge when decontextualized; something frequently is lost when an audience is distanced from the setting in which the expression was embedded. White is strongly connected to music and engagement at its community of origins, so hearing the keynote in New Orleans added a layer of meaning. One could do a close reading of the very buildings along our walk from the conference hotel to the site of the talk, the Cabildo, flagship of the Louisiana State Museum historical museum complex. Absorbing the architecture of the French, Spanish, Caribbean, and African presence in this city was itself a preparation for the Creole history that New Orleans jazz carries.

Diana Taylor, in *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), addresses both the archive—the mark of permanence through print, recordings, and captured images—and the repertoire, the experience of culture in the flesh, perceived as ephemeral and easily forgotten. She asks us to pay equal attention to both. “By taking performance seriously as a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge, performance studies allows us to expand what we mean by ‘knowledge’” (16). Some of you reading these words attended the keynote, where the knowledge Dr. White and his band were transmitting was so contagious that the presentation dissolved into exuberant dancing in the aisles. We are carriers now, too, of the power, joy, and energy that the music embodied. Michael White communicates his own understanding of the relationship between democracy and music in the words and through the accompanying sound clips. Live performance is not so much ephemeral as shape-shifting, living on in our bodies and memories and through the other means we find to pass on such profound experiences.

We hope you enjoy the experience of reading Michael White’s talk, and listening to clips of the music he played with his band. Perhaps you’ll join us in person at our next national conference, in Seattle. For details please visit our web site at [www.imaginingamerica.org](http://www.imaginingamerica.org).



Jan Cohen-Cruz  
Director, Imagining America

*Cover photo: Dr. Michael White (clarinet), Kerry Lewis (bass), Gregg Stafford (trumpet), and Detroit Brooks (banjo) at the 2009 keynote address in New Orleans. Photo by Clayborn Bensen*

## Nick Spitzer's Introduction to Michael White

Good evening and good afternoon, ladies and gentleman. I am Nick Spitzer from *American Routes* public radio and we are so glad to have you here. You are the embodiment of what we need in American academic life and American life in general: public intellectuals, creative people to get this country where it needs to be. And I really salute you for doing this. I love that you're in New Orleans, and thank you so much, just for making it down here. I am at Tulane University where, post-Katrina, we developed a tremendously strong service learning component. Last year we attracted 40,000 applicants, and they wanted to do social aid...and pleasure [audience laughter]. Now, I grew up in New England where there was a lot of social aid but not too much pleasure [more laughter]. I'm lucky and proud to be a part of the Tulane family these days, and we work closely with Xavier and many of the folks that are here this evening, so it's great to see them.

I am pleased to be here with Michael White. We've worked together over the years quite a bit: state-led programs, Smithsonian programs. I've seen him in the streets. I've seen him at the lectern. I've seen him in a lot of different situations. But I want to take you to a particular one I remember from 1985. It was the Smithsonian Folk Life Festival at the National Mall. That was the year that Louisiana was being represented, and the folklorist folks decided it would be OK to include traditional jazz. What a revelation! [audience laughter] So they did that and Michael represented traditional jazz with a great, great band. But there was one irony for Michael and for the jazz scene in New Orleans at the time. And that was that there had been an enduring schism between traditional jazz and modern jazz. We don't worry about that too much these days, partly because of what happened at that festival.

Playing down in Wolf Trap [Jazz and Blues Festival] that same week was Wynton Marsalis. Michael, I think, had once had an airline encounter with Mr. Marsalis prior to that. They didn't grow up talking to each other. Wynton, of course, went off into the modern jazz world, educated by his great family and others. Michael found traditional jazz as a teenager: playing in the St. Aug's [St. Augustine High School] band; finding out about some of his ancestors such as clarinetists Willie Joseph and Earl Fouche, Papa John Joseph, the string bass player; and then finally meeting the great Danny Barker, the jazz banjo player. So it was that after the festival one day Michael ventured out with his old buddy here, Greg Stafford on trumpet. They went to Wolf Trap and they actually had a *discussion* with Wynton [audience laughter]. A couple of years after that, Wynton came back to New Orleans, and started looking at New Orleans with new eyes. Looking at tradition as part of the creative essence of New Orleans, and by the early '90s he had recorded *Majesty of the Blues*.

That encounter helped Wynton re-center himself on New Orleans culture, and it has helped us in the world as Americans and as New Orleanians. I thank Michael for that act alone—that teaching act. Just as he listened to the ancestors, just as he researched people like George Louis and Sidney Bechet, he was able to communicate to Wynton. Michael also communicates, of course, with his students. Though he mostly teaches jazz these days, some of you may know that he’s also a professor of Spanish.

Post-Katrina, as many of you may know, Michael was in a state of suffering, a state of the blues. His spirit was as severely challenged as much as, or more than, anybody in the City. He lost an unbelievable collection, unfortunately, because he lived by the London Avenue Canal. That’s one of those famous canals where the water ran backwards and then finally burst, thanks to our planners at the Army Corps of Engineers.


I do like to tell everyone who comes to this town and says, “Oh, New Orleans is so rickety and antique. Look what happened to it.” No, it wasn’t our antiquity that did us in; our antiquity builds houses up on piers. It was slab houses and shoddy federal construction that did us in here. It was weak modernity that did us in here, not bad antiquity [*loud audience applause*].

So, unfortunately, Michael lost antique instruments. He lost manuscripts. He lost historic photographs from throughout the 20th century. He lost many, many things. But he also embodied one particular reality that we all learned. There’s tangible culture and intangible culture, and many people in this town have said, “Oh, New Orleans doesn’t have the infrastructure. What’s it going to do? It needs to rebuild. It needs this, it needs that.” I know no native New Orleanian who has returned here and lived here; I know no tourist; I know no convention visitor; I know no person who has come to settle here, that came here, or stayed here, because of the *infrastructure* [*audience laughter*]. The distinction between the tangible and intangible is the challenge to us to address the power of communities with expressive vernacular culture like the culture here. And it is the *culture*, at the center of life, that has helped rebuild New Orleans—by FEMA, by the State, by the Feds, by everything. It has been the *culture* that has moved to the center, and Michael White represents the model citizen. That is, he is a scholar, he is a creative person, and he is a public intellectual. And *his* recovery speaks to the final fact that we learned, which is that there is no water line on music. And there is no water line on the soul. This is a man of great soul who, post-Katrina, made a fabulous record called *Blue Crescent* on which he created nearly forty new recordings in traditional style. Modernity and tradition moving forward—good modernity and great tradition, together. That’s Michael White. He is here with his ensemble to speak to you and to entertain you with great dignity and great flamboyance, the essence of New Orleans Jazz. Ladies and gentlemen, Dr. Michael White [*loud applause*].



*Gregg Stafford (left) and Dr. Michael White playing their finale, Second Line, for enthusiastic conference attendees. Photo by Clayborn Bensen*

## **Traditional New Orleans Jazz as a Metaphor for American Life**

 **Play Audio #1:** *Shake It and Break It (Weary Blues)*  
Composed by Artie Matthews

### **Introduction and Contextualization**

**G**ood afternoon. It is both an honor and a pleasure to share the authentic jazz tradition of New Orleans with you, especially since so many aspects of its history, musical nature, and social significance parallel the focus of this conference’s theme, “Culture, Crisis, and Recovery.”

Throughout its existence the original New Orleans jazz style has been manifested, received, and perceived in several different ways.

To hear the musical selections included in this *Foreseeable Futures*, visit: <http://imaginingamerica.org/foreseeFutures.html> and click on *Foreseeable Futures* #9.

It began during the late 1890s as folk dance music in local African American neighborhoods. Soon it spread to all ethnic and social groups throughout the region. By the 1920s, jazz had become part of a national dance craze and also served as the ideological inspiration for the youthful rebellious spirit of the times—known, not coincidentally, as “The Jazz Age.”

Though in the United States today early jazz is mainly perceived as tourist (or concert) music, and is most often presented in watered down commercial forms, during the 1940s and ’50s a revival of interest in authentic New Orleans jazz led to its current existence as a small but vibrant international cult music.

Throughout much of Europe, Japan, Canada, Australia, and parts of Latin America, the folk style of New Orleans music is performed and supported by throngs of dedicated fans and musicians of all ages.

However, to much of the African American population of New Orleans, jazz was much more than an exciting dance music; it was also a metaphor, or living model, of an elusive democratic existence sought during a racially turbulent time in American history. It is not coincidental that the musical characteristics, values, and social practices associated with early jazz—including freedom (within structure), self expression, equality, upward mobility, and collective creation—paralleled basic aspirations of African Americans throughout the nation at the same time the new musical style originated. The highly spirited and diverse African American population among whom New Orleans jazz began possessed a traditional obsession with celebration, dancing, and good times that was matched by a collective need to react to the social, political, and legal struggles that African Americans faced across the nation, especially in the increasingly hostile and repressive post-Reconstruction climate of the late 19th century.

While the main roots of jazz existed in other places, this new musical and social revolution was the result of the unique history and cultural makeup of New Orleans. A solid foundation for the creation and development of jazz was being laid since the city's founding in 1718 by factors such as: a high early mortality rate due to extremely harsh geographical conditions; the celebratory nature of the original French Catholic settlers; a melting pot of various cultures and ethnicities; and a large diverse black population whose musical practices ranged from traditional black folk music forms to opera and classical music to a longstanding tradition of authentic West African drumming, singing, dancing, and celebration.

It was out of the strange synthesis between celebratory cultural diversity and increasing anti-black legislation and violence that the legendary cornetist Charles “Buddy” Bolden and others, influenced by black vocal styles, first began to apply a looser, freer, more rhythmic and personal approach to playing popular dance music forms.

The new music, not called “jazz” until years later, was mainly instrumental and improvised. Jazz was revolutionary in that it boldly challenged and revised standard musical concepts to produce a sound that was artistically flexible and also exciting, hot, personal, free, and very danceable. Though never universally accepted, jazz, rather than being dominated by hostile expression, presented a wide range of universal passions and emotions, which, due partly to its instrumental nature, made it accessible to a large segment of New Orleans before its mainstream diaspora during the late teens and early 1920s.



Though perceived by many among the early generations of local musicians and followers as just an exciting dance music (of rather shady origins), early New Orleans jazz had deep-rooted social significance. It expressed and symbolized the spirit, passion, and aspirations for freedom and equality in a democratic society. Contrary to popular myth, jazz was not limited to seedy bars and alcohol-related nocturnal activities. Nor was it, as is often stated, born or mainly played in the brothels of the City's notorious red light district, Storyville (1897–1917). The jazz bands in “the district” played in a few clubs. The brothels rarely had live music; and when they did, they used solo pianists. Most of the dozens of early jazz musicians of the time never played in Storyville.

Jazz was a music of the entire New Orleans community and was often heard day and night in various neighborhoods, reaching a large segment of the population (of all ages and ethnic groups) through a number of activities that maintained the city's traditional mania for celebration, entertainment, and good times: picnics, boat rides, sporting events, parades, funerals, public concerts, political rallies, dances, advertising on wagons, lakefront retreat camps, and many other events.

## **Musical Makeup of New Orleans Jazz**


Let us now look at the actual musical nature of New Orleans jazz and see how it relates to our theme of “Culture, Crisis, and Recovery.”

The most distinguishing characteristic of New Orleans jazz is *collective improvisation* within a standard configuration of small horn and rhythm sections. The prototypical New Orleans jazz band consists of a six- or seven-member group with cornet (or trumpet), clarinet, trombone, banjo, bass violin (or tuba), a drum set, and piano (when available). Today, we have the Michael White Quartet, which has the basic horn (trumpet and clarinet) and rhythm (banjo and bass) sections. We will demonstrate the inner workings of how jazz is performed and also reveal aspects of its nature, root sources, and social significance.


We'll start by constructing a popular jazz song, the *Strutters' Ball*, with each instrument demonstrating its particular role. Like most other Western musical forms, New Orleans jazz uses the twelve standard musical keys and has a chord structure consisting of a set number of bars per chorus (with the most common being 12, 16, and 32 bar forms). Both collective and solo improvisations are based around the melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic framework.

First we have the bass (played by Kerry Lewis), which provides a driving, rhythmic pulse by playing single notes of the basic chords of the song's harmonic structure. The pulse is usually four beats per measure, sometimes

accented. The dark, deep tonal color of the bass rounds out the group sound—like on a home stereo where you find a balance between the high and low sounds of the musical spectrum. Kerry will show you what the bass does during the first several bars of *Strutters' Ball*:

 **Play Audio #2:** Kerry Lewis on bass

Next we have the banjo (played by Detroit Brooks). The banjo, which is of African origin, was an important instrument in early New Orleans jazz. Along with the bass (and the piano and drums in a larger group), the banjo helps to strengthen the group's steady, driving, rhythmic pulse. Because it can play several notes simultaneously, it colors and fills out the band's sound by presenting a basic range of notes that pertains to each chord as they change, while underlying the melody. Along with the bass, Detroit will show what the banjo does.


 **Play Audio #3:** Detroit Brooks on banjo

Now we have the trumpet (played by Gregg Stafford). The trumpet is also very important in New Orleans jazz, and its role has been compared to that of a preacher or quarterback. The trumpet leads the ensemble by interpreting the song's main theme or melody. A distinguishing feature of the authentic New Orleans style is several improvised passages or choruses of call-and-response-type musical "conversations." In these conversations, the trumpet typically plays the call by improvising the melody or by creating original melodic phrases, which leave space for response from the other instruments. Now, with the bass and banjo, Gregg will show you his very personal improvised trumpet approach to the melody of the *Strutters' Ball*.

 **Play Audio #4:** Gregg Stafford on trumpet

Is it sounding like jazz yet? To complete the quartet we have the clarinet. The clarinet is the main reed instrument in New Orleans jazz and provides a higher pitched contrast to the deeper toned trumpet (and trombone). The clarinet's main role is to decorate the melody and enrich the ensemble, either through playing harmony with the trumpet lead, by providing rhythmic figures (arpeggios) that thicken both the pulse and harmonic texture, or by giving the response to the trumpet's call. The improvised musical conversations between these two horns can be exciting, as the clarinet response can take several forms: mimicking, continuing, questioning, mocking, cosigning, etc. The clarinet


and trumpet were also the two main instruments that played improvised solos in early jazz. Now with the clarinet, the entire group will play a few complete choruses of the *Strutters' Ball*.

 **Play Audio #5:** *Darktown Strutters' Ball*

Composed by Shelton Brooks

More than a set repertoire of songs, early jazz was an approach, or vernacular style, which could and did absorb and reinterpret various pre-existing forms such as ragtime, marches, blues, hymns, waltzes, and other musical styles. Hymns were mainly played by the standard ten- to twelve-member brass bands in black social club and church parades, and in funerals—later known as “jazz funerals.”

Now we are going to demonstrate a traditional hymn done in the jazz funeral style, *In the Sweet Bye and Bye*. First we will play it in a slow dirge style, mournful and sad, reflecting the grief and sense of loss at death. This music is played during the slow procession toward the cemetery with the hearse. After burial or “cutting the body loose” (allowing the procession to pass through the band, which forms two lines when the cemetery is too far), a lively up-tempo song begins—a joyous parade consisting of dancing family and social club members, friends, and throngs of onlookers. This part of the funeral is a celebration of death—the belief that the deceased has gone on to a better place and is now truly free. Here is *In the Sweet Bye and Bye*, first as a dirge, and then up-tempo.

 **Play Audio #6:** *In the Sweet Bye and Bye* (dirge)

Studio Recording:

Dr. Michael White

*In the Sweet Bye and Bye*

Composed by Samuel F. Bennett


from the CD, *Jazz from the Soul of New Orleans*

Basin Street Records

 **Play Audio #7:** *In the Sweet Bye and Bye* (up-tempo)

Another popular style that influenced and became part of New Orleans jazz was the blues. Both the standard twelve bar per chorus structure (played in various tempos and moods, from lowdown to swinging) and the emotional blues vocal style (played on horns) became common and popular early jazz devices. To show some of the range of tempo and mood, the band will play two

blues songs now. The first, *Canal Street Blues*, is a classic recorded back in 1923 by one of the greatest ensembles in jazz history, King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band. The second, *Burgundy Street Blues*, is a slow blues from the legendary clarinetist George Lewis. For many, this song's ballad-like quality conveys the spirit of what New Orleans is all about.

 **Play Audio #8:** *Canal Street Blues*  
Composed by Joseph King Oliver

 **Play Audio #9:** *Burgundy Street Blues*  
Studio Recording:  
Dr. Michael White  
*Burgundy Street Blues*  
from the CD, *A Song for George Lewis*  
Basin Street Records

## **Social Significance of New Orleans Jazz**

It is in both the performance of a traditional New Orleans jazz band, and in the largest and most popular type of jazz event—the social club parade—that the social relevance and implications of early New Orleans jazz become apparent. During the time when jazz first emerged and African Americans saw their legal and social status and chances for equality becoming increasingly limited, this new music provided a means of expressing the collective consciousness, which addressed social concerns and also served as a model for a democratic society. In an era of second-class citizenship and general invisibility for blacks in American society, jazz offered musicians social and psychological uplift and mobility.

The development of a very personal and individual tone, style, and expression was a highly encouraged objective for each musician. Having an instantly recognizable sound (for both individual players and bands) often yielded things limited or absent from normal daily black life: recognition, acceptance, respect, acknowledgement, and (creative musical) freedom. Through the personalized free improvisation of jazz one could express a wide range of emotions—from anger to love and joy to the sheer euphoria of abandonment. In the context of the first jazz generation in New Orleans the frequent opportunity to compete, win, and earn reputations (such as “King” Oliver, Bolden, Keppard, etc.) was often more important than the usually meager monetary compensation. In addition to the exaltation of the individual musician, a sense of strength and unity was seen in the equally heavy emphasis

placed on collective ensemble playing. Here the entire group becomes a team that creates a collectively improvised, unified sound that is as unique and recognizable as that produced by any one individual.

It is neither ironic nor accidental that dozens of African American social and benevolent organizations, which grew in large numbers during and after the Reconstruction period, became the principal sponsors of jazz-related activities throughout much of the 20th century. In addition to a number of services designed for social aid and community uplift, these groups frequently sponsored “pleasurable” activities, like parades, picnics, and dances. (The oldest of these organizations, the Young Men’s Olympian Social Aid & Pleasure Club, celebrated its 125th anniversary this past Sunday—September 27, 2009—with a massive community parade that included several divisions of members and six brass bands.)

The social club parade, which is an annual event (given on Sunday afternoons by individual clubs between the spring and fall of each year) that celebrates anniversaries or holidays, mainly in African American neighborhoods, is physically, culturally, and psychologically far removed from the better known and publicized Mardi Gras parades. The traditional social club parade—which, like the New Orleans-style brass band, most probably developed along with jazz—has three components. The first is the social club, which is made up of several divisions (according to age or gender) that walk and dance along the parade route. Club members are uniformly adorned in elaborate, bold-colored outfits complete with corresponding hats, sashes, umbrellas, fans, and baskets.

The traditional social club parade also has one or more brass bands, dressed in black suits with white caps. (In earlier years special band uniforms were common.) The brass bands play medium-fast tempo, New Orleans-style jazz versions of marches, hymns, blues, jazz standards, and old pop songs. The unique syncopated bass drum and tuba rhythms, and the thick texture of the ten- to twelve-piece improvising ensemble, often create a powerful spiritual sound that is hypnotic and irresistible.

No real New Orleans social club parade would be complete without second liners. These are the hundreds (up to thousands) of anonymous individuals who join the parade by following alongside, dancing and cheering throughout its duration. Some actually plan to attend the event, some run into it by accident, and others are helplessly drawn from their homes by the sound of hot brass band music, which can be heard for many blocks around. The *second line*—a dance done by the crowd and club members—is a lively, West African-derived free-form style of endless movements, which parallel the individual creativity and variety found in brass band jazz. At times it seems as if the

spontaneous movements of the dancers are, in reality, the band's hot phrases and rhythms that were set free and put to motion—joyously leaping from the depths of the instruments like genies escaping from centuries spent in closed bottles. The reverse is also true, as the music can reflect a plethora of sounds that seem like dancing phrases.

The collective creation and growing intensity of a *second line parade*, at times, take on a magical spiritual dimension, in which traditional concepts of existence are challenged. In this euphoric democratic world, freedom, equality, and acceptance are constantly demonstrated in music, dance, and the procession in general. Age, education, manner of dress, social status, money, physical and mental deformities, attractiveness, etc., seem almost nonexistent, as demonstrated by general mutual acceptance, respect, and praise for individual creative dancing seen during countless random encounters of second liners or club members along the parade route.

One interesting aspect of the almost surreal nature of New Orleans black social club parades is the transformation and incorporation of objects into “dance partners.” Second liners are often seen dancing on top of, on the side of, around, and through things that, in the “real world,” might be signs of progress, success, restrictions, or limitations (cars, houses, streets, fences, red lights, porches’ steps, bridges, stop signs, etc.). Even nature (trees, wind, mud, etc.), which could deter or halt processions or alter their route in most places, is transformed into a harmless participant in the dance. For example, a hard downpour doesn’t end the parade, but merely provides new opportunities to create individual improvised dance movements using wet clothes and water drenched streets. Overall the *second line* makes strong statements about concepts such as transformation, power, conquest, possibility, spirituality, overcoming, and liberty.

The metaphor of New Orleans jazz (and the *second line*) as a model of democracy can be extended by looking at how the restructuring or reinterpretation of laws and existing social values can be used to achieve social objectives. In the actual music, that restructuring is seen in the approach toward a staple of worldwide brass band performance as well as a common jazz song type—the European-derived march. The march is the strictest, most involved, and most difficult form commonly played in early jazz. Originating from standard written marches (which were strictly read from scores everywhere else), the jazz form retains the characteristic introductions, the multiple sections, interludes, key changes, harmonic structure changes, brakes, and shifts of volume.

The typical New Orleans approach, using improvisation, individual interpretation, collective creation, black vocal effects, and danceable rhythms

did not completely alter or destroy the strict march form. Instead, the early jazz use of marches “freed” them, demonstrating how the form could maintain its basic structure and its rules of harmony and melody while still achieving a sound that was loose, fresh, improvised, and more exciting.

At this time the quartet will demonstrate a traditional march that goes back to the early days of jazz, *Panama*. The song was written in 1901 by New York-based composer William H. Tyers, and became a popular band song throughout America, played according to written arrangements. In New Orleans it became an improvised favorite of many jazz and brass bands. Here is *Panama*.



### **Play Audio #10: *Panama***

Composed by William H. Tyers

## **Conclusions**

What can we conclude and learn from traditional New Orleans jazz? In its original manifestation jazz was a music that accompanied and addressed the social need of the local black community. It was a means of expressing hopes and desires, of coping with difficult social conditions, of escaping (at least temporarily) into a world in which individual and collective identity could be defined, redefined, and openly displayed. In a sense, it used cultural history to address a social crisis and pointed the way for recovery and transformation. In its authentic presentation, as we have demonstrated here, the values and implications about freedom, democracy, cultural diversity, etc., still form a valid and powerful metaphor. Traditional jazz addresses intrinsic American values on several levels and implies a philosophical framework to implement them. The jazz funeral shows how to recover from tragedy through the process of mourning and taking an optimistic view of loss and transition.

On a personal level jazz has provided many positive life-changing benefits: a connection to ancestral heritage, individual development, endless challenges, and an open door to the world. In this post-Hurricane Katrina era my musical life has helped me to survive a series of tough personal losses (home, family members, friends, archival collection, etc.); it has helped me to cope in a period of continuing recovery-related difficulties. It has brought a renewed faith, strength, and wisdom that nurtures the soul and brings comfort through union with others. For the City of New Orleans our musical heritage has played a role in the continuing struggle for recovery. Many New Orleanians learned the value of our unique cultural traditions while displaced and living in places where the cultural heritage was not as rich. A common fear of forever losing jazz, brass bands, social aid & pleasure clubs, jazz funerals, and other local customs is a reminder of a common bond that unites us all.

From a more worldly perspective, New Orleans jazz is also a reflection of universal passions, emotions, and, in a sense, is a local expression of the human experience. An authentic performance of jazz has spiritual and philosophical overtones that, even on a universal level, can bring about temporary release of worries through its expression of common emotions: love, joy, hope, sadness, anger, escape, etc. (That is why the more authentic form of New Orleans jazz has maintained its small, but ever-present, international cult following.)

In some ways, a renewed sense of the importance of New Orleans' unique traditions has taken root since the hurricane. Maintaining and preserving cultural heritage has become a serious topic among some citizens and public officials. Some school programs that teach local culture have gained impetus. A few of the modern oriented "funk"-style brass bands have begun to learn and incorporate a more traditional style and repertoire.

A local community institution, the artist retreat facility *A Studio in the Woods*, whose founders Joe and Luciene Carmichael are here with us this evening, assisted a number of local musicians and other artists through a series of "restoration residencies." These special grants were designed both to help displaced artists return back home and to provide time, space, and encouragement for creative production. In December 2007, I received a residency, which brought a well-needed respite from long commutes between New Orleans and Houston, and from a number of post-Katrina recovery problems, including depression and sheer exhaustion. Though at first I felt devoid of any creative ideas, by the end of the month-long residency I had written nearly three dozen songs. The residency was therapeutic and provided an outlet to express in music my feelings, and those of many New Orleanians, about our evacuation experiences, losses, concerns, memories, sufferings, frustrations, undying spirit, and love for our city.

Soon after the residency, I moved from fearing that, post-Katrina, there might not be much left for me in music, to producing my most successful recording, *Blue Crescent* (Basin Street Records, 2008). The CD contains a dozen original songs (written during my retreat) that explore a new approach to traditional New Orleans jazz using personal experiences and historical events, and blends with other ethnic folk musics. To my surprise the overall mood of the recording is optimistic and upbeat, and seems to convey joy in positive transition. The other musicians relished and excelled in these new musical canvases for expressing the common emotions that we all shared.

Now we are going to perform an original composition from *Blue Crescent*. This is a traditional style, up-tempo hymn with a vocal message that was originally intended as a message to the people of New Orleans on how faith,



unity, and tradition could bring us through the aftermath of the Katrina crisis. We will then close this evening by inviting you to join us—by expressing yourselves in your own personal way of moving—with a song that concludes many New Orleans functions, the *Second Line*. The locals in the house can help show you what we mean!

But first, featuring Gregg Stafford on vocals, is (*Come Together*) *Sunday Morning*.



**Play Audio #11:** *Sunday Morning*

Studio Recording:

Dr. Michael White

*Sunday Morning*

from the CD, *Blue Crescent*

Basin Street Records



**Play Audio #12:** *Second Line*

# Response to Michael White's Keynote Address

by Adam Bush

It's like a man being born in a little place, just a bend in the road somewhere. After a while he begins to travel the road. He travels all the road there is and then he comes back. That man, he understands something when he gets back. He knows the road goes away and he knows the road comes back. He knows that road comes back just the same way it goes away.

But you take another man. He's been there in that bend in the road, and he never goes away. Time goes by and he's coming to the end of his days. He looks at that road and he doesn't really know what it is. He's missed it. That road, it got away from him. All he knows is how it starts off. He never gets to know where it goes and how it comes back, how it feels to come back. ...The music, it's that road.

—Sidney Bechet, *Treat It Gentle*<sup>1</sup>

Sidney Bechet's autobiography, *Treat It Gentle*, like many jazz musicians' narratives, ties much of its story and music to travel; from New Orleans to Chicago to New York to Paris, Bechet's trajectory and success as a musician mirrors his migration farther and farther away from home. Ken Burns's 2000 PBS documentary, *Jazz*, expertly painted a picture of such success built upon a triumphant nationalism of migration, movement, modernity, and freedom. Authenticity may come from place, but success comes from travel.

Diasporas and forced migrations are not talked about in this common version of the story. The standard line is that music opens up *opportunities* to leave home—from riverboats to college music scholarships to vaudeville circuits—but to be forced to leave is a story absent from the canonization and definition of musical modernity. It is here that Dr. White's moving keynote at the 2009 Imagining America conference in New Orleans, and other stories of exile and return throughout the Gulf Coast, reframe how and why we can examine "Traditional New Orleans Jazz as a Metaphor for American Life."

In the summer of 2005 in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, White escaped to Houston as part of a forced migration whose effects are still being felt. Upon his return six weeks later, as White recounts, he found a house "smashed, shattered, and scattered," but what really made "reality of loss hit home" was the destruction of his archive of music history (including treasures such as a white clarinet mouthpiece belonging to Sidney Bechet<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>1</sup> Sidney Bechet, *Treat It Gentle*, (New York: DaCapo Press, 1978), pp. 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Michael White, "Reflections of an Authentic Jazz Life in Pre-Katrina New Orleans," *Journal of American History*, December 2007.



*Members of the Little Seven Brass Band play at the conference's closing reception at The Porch Cultural Organization. Photo by Adam Bush*

The music that White so reveres, while connected to stories of migration and movement away, is also, at its heart, inextricably tied to a sense of home and return. Dr. White writes, for example, about the New Orleans *second line parade*:

These are the hundreds (up to thousands) of anonymous individuals who join the parade by following alongside, dancing and cheering throughout its duration. Some actually plan to attend the event, some run into it by accident, and others are helplessly drawn from their homes by the sound of hot brass band music, which can be heard for many blocks around.<sup>3</sup>

It is this sense of home and place that is absent from a historiography forever moving forward and a hagiography built around soloists who achieved individual success. For Bechet as well, music is not simply a way out; by road, riverboat, or tour bus, the road of black music was also a road back and a means to reencounter home.

I wonder if, for White, the loss of his music memorabilia was less about the artifacts themselves than the links they fostered between him and what he called the “*authentic origins of traditional New Orleans jazz.*” White argues, in the preceding pages, that the authentic jazz tradition lies in past social realities, instrumentation, and style of turn-of-the-century New Orleans music. But his relation to this authenticity lay deeper than musical style.

<sup>3</sup> Michael White, “*Traditional New Orleans Jazz as a Metaphor For American Life,*” *Imagining America Keynote Address, 2009.*

For Dr. White, music's meaning seems to exist as a "result of the unique history and cultural makeup of New Orleans" where cultural history addresses "a social crisis and [points] the way for recovery and transformation." I heard that phrase as "recovery band transformation"<sup>4</sup>—a sort of emergency sonic surgery—where music sutures the wounds of disaster and stitches together a genealogy between past musical moments and present lived conditions.

Sidney Bechet creates a similar lineage in his autobiography, where he begins the story of his jazz-filled life not with the time of his birth in New Orleans, but with a mythical origin story of his enslaved grandfather, Omar, who escapes with his life into the swamps of Louisiana. A man who "could sing; he danced [in Congo Square], he was a leader. It was natural to him; and everyone followed him."<sup>5</sup> Bechet's autobiography looks backward to Omar in a way that mirrors Dr. White's look back to the authentic jazz tradition: both build the chords of their music out of the social conditions of early New Orleans.

Additionally, however, both musicians close their narratives looking forward, to the musical traditions yet to be formed and yet to be heard. As Bechet writes at the close of his book:

There's all the music that's been played, and there's all the music that hasn't been heard yet...so many men who've spent their lives just making melody and who haven't been heard yet...I'd like to hear it all one more time. I'd like to sit in a box at some performance and see all I saw years ago and hear all I heard way back to the start. I want to sit there and you could come in and find me in that box and I'd have a smile on my face. What I'd be feeling is "the music, it has a home."<sup>6</sup>

While Bechet begins his story through the lived experience of slavery and White talks about the repressive post-Reconstruction climate of the late 19th and early 20th century in which jazz was developed, both also imagine a rehearing of the music in which "the process of mourning [takes] an optimistic view of loss and transition."<sup>7</sup> For White, that future is one that finds its model in the improvisatory celebration of the *second line parade*, which "makes strong statements about concepts such as transformation, power, conquest, possibility, spirituality, overcoming, and liberty."<sup>8</sup> The *second line* music transforms the social conditions of the present moment into a celebration of both an alternative present world and a possible future.

<sup>4</sup> White, *Traditional New Orleans Jazz*.

<sup>5</sup> Bechet, *Treat It Gentle*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 218-219.

<sup>7</sup> White, *Traditional New Orleans Jazz*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Today, post-Katrina, looking to an alternative present takes on new urgency. Rather than imagining a utopic place, Bechet and White here celebrate an uchronic moment,<sup>9</sup> acknowledging how history could or should have gone. In many ways, that's what the *second line* tradition is about—recognizing and celebrating a world that could be at hand. Following Hurricane Katrina, many in the Gulf Coast talked about a possible present where “this house, this car may have gotten torn up August 29th but it doesn't have to be here July 29th [11 months later]...things might have been otherwise.”<sup>10</sup> Through the uchronic form, speakers said that the most desirable of possible worlds could still be created someday, if the right opportunities are seized.

White talks in his keynote about a renewed sense of musical tradition and authenticity since 2005. While I don't doubt that, this seems to me much more about “connection rather than canonization...[and finding] value in the social relations that playing and listening create rather than in the notes and chords and rhythms all by themselves.”<sup>11</sup> The sounds of post-Katrina New Orleans are not just sounds of those who were forced to leave. They are also about those who could not leave and those who chose to return; and together these voices form complicated harmonies. Under these conditions, music in New Orleans is not looking to create a new landscape in which to play, but a new *soundscape* in which to hear the present and, in doing so, perhaps gives us a new model for understanding what types of engagement are needed in New Orleans. These sounds are grounded in everyday music making; of the “many men who've spent their lives just making melody and who haven't been heard yet.”<sup>12</sup>

Open Sound New Orleans is one such platform that answers White's call to “join in” on the musicking.<sup>13</sup> Founded in 2007, Open Sound “is a community media project that invites and enables New Orleanians to document their lives in sound.”<sup>14</sup> From ambient noises of the Mississippi to street parades to an interview with a descendant of Homer Plessy, Open Sound asks its visitors to suspend their vision and *hear* the geography of the city. It is, at its heart, a collaborative endeavor to “make more accessible the authentic, unedited sounds and voices of New Orleans. Sharing the sounds of our city as we hear them, move through them, and create them... and participate in New Orleans' public culture with intentionality.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> My introduction to this came from Allesandro Portelli's *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, (SUNY Press, 1991), p. 99.

<sup>10</sup> Author's interview with New Orleans resident, Michael Taylor, New Orleans, July 2006.

<sup>11</sup> George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 91.

<sup>12</sup> Bechet, *Treat It Gentle*, p. 218.

<sup>13</sup> I borrow the term 'musicking' from Christopher Small who describes music as “not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do. That apparent thing 'music' is a figment, an abstraction of the action, whose reality vanishes as soon as we examine it at all closely.” (Christopher Small Musicking, p. 2)

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.opensoundneworleans.com/>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

One of my favorite pieces on Open Sound New Orleans' site features Ed Buckner. You can listen to it (labeled as "Interview with Ed Buckner, Pie Man") and browse the site at <http://www.opensoundneworleans.com/>. As the audio clip makes clear, and the site's founders discuss,

Ed's selling pies but he's not only selling pies. He's participating in the city's culture by chanting this way... I think it's about collaboration. Ed comes out and he does his thing and people come out of their houses and they buy a pie. And, just like the *second line* pulls you out of your house and the band has to play really well and you have to get in line and dance for it to really work well—it's a collaboration and there's a lot of instances like that in New Orleans.<sup>16</sup>

The use of sound as community collaboration extends to the work Buckner does outside of his pie selling, for he is also the leader of the Little Seven Brass Band and the Director of The Porch Cultural Organization. The Porch, founded in January of 2006 by a group including artists Willie Birch and Ron Bechet (grandnephew of Sidney), stands today as a prime example of artists creating the achronic sounds yet unplayed that Sidney Bechet imagined.

The Porch conducts neighborhood programs including oral history and theater, which have helped over the past five years to document and redefine the stories and music of the City.<sup>17</sup> Throughout his life, though pointedly following the summer of 2005, Ron has contributed to neighborhood and "community arts projects, memorials, youth theatre workshops, performance and installation art—anything that enhances life and creates new opportunities to rebuild community for New Orleans and its residents."<sup>18</sup> Grounded firmly in the Seventh Ward, The Porch actively listens to the sounds of New Orleans and, like a call and response, counters with means to create and document the new sounds that "haven't been heard yet."

I write this response to Michael White's essay in January 2010, as Haiti tries to emerge from the rubble of both a devastating earthquake and years of postcolonial oppression from its global neighbors. While jazz music can be played as a representation of American ideals, those ideals are complicated ones. The lived conditions of music's creation also show how, as Fred Moten writes, "democracy is the name that has been assigned to a dream as well as to certain already existing realities that are lived, by many, as a nightmare."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> NPR *Weekend Edition* interview with site founders Heather Booth and Jacob Brancasi. Accessed by the author here: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=106473147>.

<sup>17</sup> It also, appropriately, closed-out Imagining America's 2009 conference (which Bechet co-chaired along with Dan Etheridge, Professor and Assistant Director of the Tulane City Center) with a performance of the Little Seven Brass Band.

<sup>18</sup> <http://ny2no.net/homeneurorleans/home/>

<sup>19</sup> Fred Moten in Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, eds., *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, (NYU Press, 2007), p. 76.

As New Orleans has shown and as Haiti reminds us today, the dreams of equality for some have come at the cost of inequality for many. In the keynote, while well aware of the inequities, White also emphasized the democratic ideal presented in jazz's "freedom (within structure), self expression, equality, upward mobility, and collective creation."<sup>20</sup> Like *Imagining America* endeavors to show, such art is "woven into the fabric of our daily lives, not worn as a decoration on its surface or observed from afar as the province of the privileged few."<sup>21</sup>

Just as we must recognize the 'everyday-ness' of inequality, Dr. White's talk reminds us to listen to the daily resistances and improvisations that many times go unheard. Rebecca Solnit writes in her book, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, that everyday life is "already a disaster of sorts," one "from which actual disaster liberates us." In terms of Katrina, Solnit records the spirit of generosity and improvisational utopias that emerged throughout the city amidst a political culture that clung to separatism and individual survival. While daily life may be predicated on the demands of capitalism and competition, in moments of disaster "the shackles of conventional belief and role fall away and the possibilities open up."<sup>22</sup>

Dr. White's music and words and other projects throughout the Gulf Coast embody sound's ability to communicate a sense of home in the face of dispersal, by not simply reinforcing the traditional music of a place, but by creating local sounds that hold within them "a sensibility of the road;"<sup>23</sup> an aesthetics of constant change, collaboration, and improvisation against, toward, and with the social conditions of the present moment and its future possibilities. Through these cultural manifestations of action, we can move beyond a story that prioritizes the consecration of the past and, instead, prioritizes a new sonic present.

<sup>20</sup> White, *Traditional New Orleans Jazz*.

<sup>21</sup> *Imagining America*, "The End of the Beginning: Report on the First Two Years"

<sup>22</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, (Viking Press, 2009), p. 97.

<sup>23</sup> Herman S. Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation (American Crossroads)*, (University of California Press, 2005), p. 62.

## Biographical Sketches

**Dr. Michael White** is Professor of Spanish and African American Music and holds the Rosa and Charles Keller Endowed Chair in the Humanities at Xavier University. He is an acknowledged expert of traditional New Orleans jazz and an innovative jazz clarinetist in his own right. Professor White is a 2008 NEA National Heritage Fellowship winner.

As noted by his record company, Basin Street Records, White was born and raised in New Orleans, and is related to such pioneering jazz musicians as bassist Papa John Joseph (who was an associate of Buddy Bolden), and clarinetists Willie Joseph and Earl Fouche (who recorded with Sam Morgan in 1927). In addition to being a major performer whose clarinet style is inspired by the Creole and blues playing of Johnny Dodds, Jimmie Noone, Edmond Hall, George Lewis, Barney Bigard, and Omer Simeon, Dr. Michael White has appeared on more than three dozen recordings, including 11 CDs of his own. He has traveled the world, performing in over two dozen countries, and his was the first traditional New Orleans jazz band to play at the legendary Village Vanguard, where he has been a regular for many years. White is featured in several dozen books, has written scores of essays that have appeared in journals, books, and encyclopedias, has worked on over two dozen documentary films, and has worked with Wynton Marsalis creating concert tributes to the early New Orleans jazz greats.

**Nick Spitzer**, Professor of American Studies and Communication at Tulane University, is host of NPR's *American Routes*. Nick specializes in American music and the cultures of the Gulf South, and received a PhD in anthropology from the University of Texas with his dissertation on zydeco music and Afro-French Louisiana culture and identities.

**Adam Bush**, Associate Director of Imagining America's PAGE program—Publicly Active Graduate Education—received his BS at Columbia University and MA in the History of Consciousness Department at University of California, Santa Cruz. Bush co-founded College Unbound, a new program focused on outcome-based learning, civic engagement, and alternative sites of pedagogy to increase retention rates for first generation college students.

Special thanks to the co-chairs of the New Orleans conference, Dan Etheridge, environmentalist of Tulane University, and Ron Bechet, art professor of Xavier University of New Orleans.



## *Foreseeable Futures #9: Traditional New Orleans Jazz as a Metaphor for American Life*

“In its original manifestation, jazz was a music that accompanied and addressed the social need of the local black community. It was a means of expressing hopes and desires, of coping with difficult social conditions, of escaping (at least temporarily) into a world in which individual and collective identity could be defined, redefined, and openly displayed. In a sense, it used cultural history to address a social crisis and pointed the way for recovery and transformation. In its authentic presentation, as we have demonstrated here, the values and implications about freedom, democracy, cultural diversity, etc., still form a valid and powerful metaphor. Traditional jazz addresses intrinsic American values on several levels and implies a philosophical framework to implement them.”

—Dr. Michael White

In this essay, originally presented as the keynote address for Imagining America’s 2009 conference in New Orleans, jazz musician and scholar Michael G. White weaves a profound understanding of the meaning of traditional New Orleans jazz with the ideals of democratic life. Through his own words and live music from his four-piece ensemble, White explores the way traditional jazz foregrounds ideas about cultural and racial identity; the centrality of cultural practice as a medium for personal and political response to political realities; and the harmonies and tensions between virtuosic and collaborative invention. In this interactive *Foreseeable Futures*, we provide online musical clips from Dr. White’s keynote address, and invite the reader to experience the impact of what is typically the ephemerality of live performance.



*Dr. Michael White*



Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life is a consortium of colleges and universities committed to public scholarship and practice in the arts, humanities, and design. Imagining America articulates how campus-community partnerships contribute to local and national civic life while furthering recognition of public scholarship’s value in higher education itself.

For a complete list of *Foreseeable Futures*, visit [www.imaginingamerica.org](http://www.imaginingamerica.org).

As with all of our publications, these reports can be ordered for distribution at conferences and meetings. Please contact the Imagining America office by e-mailing—[imaginingamerica@syr.edu](mailto:imaginingamerica@syr.edu).