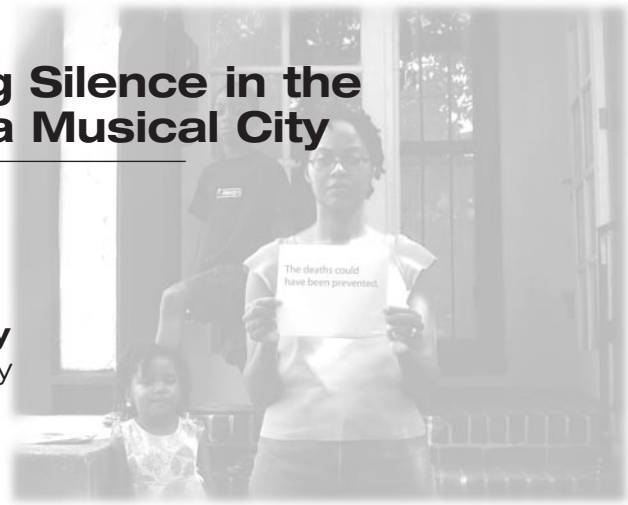


Resounding Silence in the Streets of a Musical City

Matt Sakakeeny
Columbia University



New Orleans is a musical city where sound is inextricable from the experience of place. Sound has played a defining role in distinctive cultural practices such as jazz funerals and parades called “second lines,” in which African Americans have made claims on the contested city streets for over a century. How will New Orleans re-sound after extraordinary forces claimed those same streets?

Keywords: *New Orleans; Hurricane Katrina; acoustemology; race; second line*

To be cultural, to have a culture, is to inhabit a place sufficiently intensely to cultivate it.

—Edward S. Casey (1996, p. 34)

Of all the legends about Buddy Bolden—widely regarded as the first jazz musician in New Orleans at the turn of the century—none excites jazz enthusiasts more than the way he “called his children home.” At Johnson Park on weekend afternoons, Bolden would point his trumpet to the heavens and blow loud and “hot,” enticing the audience to leave nearby Lincoln Park, where John Robichaux’s band played “sweet” pre-jazz music (Marquis, 1978). “The blowingest man that ever lived since Gabriel,” as pianist Jelly Roll Morton referred to Bolden, was keenly attuned to the ways that people and sound work together to create the place that is New Orleans.

New Orleans is a musical city, and although spatial discourse has tended to privilege the visual, the cultural practices of New Orleans beg for a multisensory understanding of place as both landscape and soundscape. Steven Feld (1996) has attempted to position sound as a central trope of place through his concept of *acoustemology*, which he defines as “conditions of acoustic sensation, knowledge, and imagination embodied in the culturally particular sense of place” (p. 91). Although Feld is primarily concerned with the sensorial relationship to natural environments in remote areas, sound is inextricable from the experience of place throughout urban New Orleans. Any visitor to Bourbon Street experiences a sensory maelstrom: live dance music pouring out of

nightclubs, indigenous food and excessive drink from bars and restaurants, and the sights of men and women exposing their bodies for strings of plastic beads. In predominantly African American neighborhoods outside the tourist environs of the French Quarter, other distinctive cultural practices in which sound also plays a defining role have flourished for over a century. Contemporary jazz funerals and parades called “second lines,” organized around the performance of marching bands, reveal residues of past epochs that constitute the history of New Orleans as place and culture. As a French, Spanish, and American city, New Orleans has always maintained a significant Black population that has continuously and resourcefully created a coherent yet flexible collective identity through the combination of what Stuart Hall (2003) calls “presences”: the *présence Africaine*, *présence Européene*, and *présence Américaine*.

Memories of colonial, African, and American pasts are most vitally and dynamically reshaped in the present when African Americans and others take to the streets for second lines, which occur each weekend from October to April (Regis, 1999). Assemblages of hundreds or even thousands of people marching to brass bands are fundamental to the practice of everyday life in New Orleans, and they generate a sonic landscape that provides the most identifiable acoustemological symbol of the city. In these parades linger traces from African pasts, including rituals of ceremonial procession, the assistance of mutual aid societies in organizing the parades, and a musical emphasis on rhythm that is fundamentally linked to bodily movement. Yet the brass bands that supply the music for second lines clearly derive from the model of European military bands, which were used by colonial and American powers as displays of authority to enforce order. When the collapse of the Confederacy brought limited and conditional freedom, former slaves appropriated the instruments of military bands (*présence Européene*) and drew from pasts that preceded the middle passage (*présence Africaine*) to fashion a new cultural identity in the milieu of southern Reconstruction (*présence Américaine*). African Americans quickly claimed ownership of the very streets where military bands had marched, subverting the racial order by exchanging regimented sonic order for an improvised “joyful noise” and replacing disciplined White bodies marching in formation with dancing Black bodies freed from forced labor. In 1896, a young Buddy Bolden performed in a second line for the first time, and within a year, he had taken brass bands off the streets and into the nightclubs, where the probing, restless music eventually morphed into jazz.

After its birth in New Orleans, jazz’s development became associated with larger cities, and in recent years, it has been bestowed cultural capital as America’s most singular artistic invention, but African American musicians in New Orleans have, for the most part, managed only to subsist on a livable wage. After the failure of Reconstruction, decades of Jim Crow rule, and sustained and systematic disempowerment, class lines in New Orleans have generally developed along racial lines, and Black performers are granted little exceptional status. Today, the parades that wind through the contested streets of the city remain a primary forum for “sounding back” to the unending economic and political disparity.

An example of sounding back: In the 1960s, the city built an interstate between the housing projects and the French Quarter, erecting an overpass above Claiborne Avenue, the main thoroughfare and vibrant center of activity in a predominantly African American section of town. Today, dilapidated buildings flank the unsightly highway, and much of the activity on the streets comes from cars driving by. Every Mardi Gras, however, when the magnificent Zulu parade passes underneath the overpass at the intersection of Claiborne and Orleans, the brass bands respond to past and current

attempts at exclusion by blowing their horns as loud as possible, the sound careening off the concrete infrastructure. The massive ramps and columns, erected in part to further denigrate Black New Orleanians, serve to amplify and reverberate the sonic bombard. The interstate is appropriated for purposes antithetical to its original intent, much like the brass instruments that were appropriated from military bands over 100 years



Figure 1. The First Jazz Funeral After Katrina: The Hot 8 Brass Band Leads a Procession for Departed Chef Austin Leslie, October 9, 2005.

Source: Photo by Chris Granger, ©2005 Times-Picayune Publishing Company, all rights reserved. Used with the permission of the *Times-Picayune*.

ago. Tactics of improvisation manipulate the tools of the oppressor into weapons of the weak, thus transforming the social spaces in which they operate (de Certeau, 1984; Scott, 1985).¹

On August 29, 2005, extraordinary forces claimed the streets of New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath have left the city void of the people who constituted it as place. For 300 years, New Orleans has been many things, but it has never been silent until now, and we cannot divine exactly how New Orleans will re-sound. We do know that the music of New Orleans has already proved to be prosperous beyond the geographic boundaries of the city. From Louis Armstrong to Wynton Marsalis, local musicians have long found the path to international success via adopted hometowns such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. After Katrina, New Orleans displaced musicians have been particularly resourceful in resituating themselves and restarting their careers in new locations. The question of whether New Orleans-derived culture is elastic enough to survive elsewhere has already been answered. The more vexing question is whether the culture of New Orleans will find new coherence in its place of origin. Cultural practices belong as much to the place as to the practitioners. As Edward Casey (1996) writes, “Bodies and places are connatural terms. They interanimate each other” (p. 24). The process through which bodies are encultured is inseparable from the process through which they are emplaced. Place has anchored culture and culture has anchored place in New Orleans, creating a dialogic relationship whereby culture is *constituted* in place and *constitutive* of place. Community parades are not only *in* New Orleans, they are *of* New Orleans.

There is little doubt that the terrain of New Orleans has been forever altered, but it is less clear how the city’s residents have been transformed. The population has had one of the highest stability rates in the country; fewer families move to or away from New Orleans than other comparable cities (Dunlap, 2005). This high degree of stasis has allowed New Orleanians to maintain a vital connection to both culture and place, developing a framework that is at once resilient and pliable. What will happen to the culture and the place of New Orleans now that its people have been forcibly relocated?

As I write a little more than a month after Katrina, New Orleans remains essentially uninhabited, an empty place. When former residents return, and new arrivals become residents, will the dynamism and flexibility that has characterized New Orleans culture allow for the creation of new outlets and the restructuring of former ones? As New Orleans is reconstituted, how will the plans of governmental organizations, developers, and contractors rearrange the social organization of the city? Will neighborhoods long associated with certain soundscapes become replaced with something else? New Orleansians have creatively responded to past crises, such as enslavement, failed Reconstruction, Jim Crow, enforced integration, and continued inequity. This current disaster, however unprecedented, is but the latest episode in an uninterrupted history of disasters and the “anonymous and everyday” responses to them (de Certeau, 1984, p. v).

Note

1. There is a continuity of ingenuity between brass bands and hip-hop artists: African American deejays and early rap artists claimed ownership of urban spaces in New York City through the “misuse” of technological instruments such as turntables, synthesizers, and digital samplers (modern-day equivalents of European brass instruments). The affinity of the two musics is evidenced by the adoption of hip-hop elements into contemporary brass band performances by groups such as the Soul Rebels and the development of a distinctive hip-hop style in New Orleans known as “bounce” music, which can be heard blaring out of parked cars along second line parade routes.

References

- de Certeau, Michel. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dunlap, David W. (2005, September 1). Future face of New Orleans has an uncertain look for now. *The New York Times*, p. A19.
- Casey, Edward S. (1996). How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time: Phenomenological prolegomena. In Steven Feld & Keith Basso (Eds.), *Senses of place* (pp. 13-85). Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Feld, Steven. (1996). Waterfalls of song: An acoustemology of place resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea. In Steven Feld & Keith Basso (Eds.), *Senses of place* (pp. 91-135). Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Hall, Stuart. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In Jonathan Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Marquis, Donald M. (1978). *In search of Buddy Bolden, first man of jazz*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Regis, Helen. (1999). Second lines, minstrelsy, and the contested landscapes of New Orleans Afro-Creole festivals. *Cultural Anthropology*, 14(4), 472-504.
- Scott, James C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Matt Sakakeeny is a Ph.D. candidate in ethnomusicology at Columbia University. He lived in New Orleans for several years as the coproducer of the public radio show American Routes. His dissertation project focuses on cultural practices in the streets of New Orleans and cultural responses to disaster.