

# “Some Kind of Something Is Going On Down There”

## Crossroads at Congo Square

by Robert H. Cataliotti

The [Neville Brothers](#)' live recording of the song “Congo Square” opens with a funky, percolating, second line<sup>1</sup> drum groove, over which Cyril Neville declares,

*We're gonna take you to New Orleans,  
To that place where American music was born, y'all,  
A place called Congo Square.*

The song, written by guitarist Sonny Landreth, harmonica player Mel Melton, and bassist David Ranson, is a paean to the nineteenth-century Sunday gatherings of African people on a field at the back of the city that were a combination of music and dance, spiritual ritual, marketplace, socializing, and tourist attraction. Congo Square in New Orleans brought together people from a range of African nations. While some were brought directly from Africa, many came through Saint-Domingue/Haiti and Cuba. African people born in the Americas also joined in the mix, and the gatherings attracted both the enslaved and free people of color (*gens de couleur libres*). In addition, Native Americans and Caucasian people whose origins were in Europe and the United States were drawn to the festivities.

The gatherings in Congo Square were not only, as Neville asserts, an essential source point for American music; they were also an outlet to survive, resist, and transcend the brutal dehumanization and exploitation of slavery by maintaining a link to an African identity. These gatherings formed an artistic, cultural, and economic crossroads that was mysterious, powerful, and without precedent. As the song “Congo Square” proclaims, “some kind of something is going on down there.”

Congo Square was unique because it was virtually the only locale in North America where African people were allowed to gather to perform their traditional music, especially their drumming. The music they made was founded on African-based,

cultural retentions: call and response, improvisation, and rhythmic sophistication, and, eventually, these building blocks of expressive, black folk culture interacted with and absorbed elements of the cultures they encountered to create something distinctively American. In *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall asserts that the African people who developed the Afro-Creole culture of New Orleans had a profound influence on the dominant Anglo culture of the United States. “They turned inhospitable swamplands into a refuge for the independent, the defiant, the creative ‘unimportant’ people who tore down barriers of language and culture among peoples throughout the world and continue to sing to them of joy and the triumph of the human spirit”.<sup>2</sup> Congo Square was the epicenter of this culture and played an essential role in the Africanization of American culture.

The first extant reference to the locale as “Congo,” according to Freddi Williams Evans’s *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans*, was in 1786, when Bishop Cyrillo complained in a letter that the performances were taking place prior to the end of Sunday mass, which he found disrespectful since all residents, black and white, were expected to participate in Catholic worship. This resulted in Governor Miró ruling that the gatherings of people of African descent could not begin until Sunday afternoons after religious services had concluded.<sup>3</sup> By 1817, the gatherings, which had taken place in a number of locations around the city, were strictly confined to Congo Square.<sup>4</sup> The accounts that exist today come largely from white European or American writers, who, Evans suggests, “documented a group of people whom they did not understand linguistically, spiritually, culturally and whom they considered inferior.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet, these travelogues, newspaper accounts, and letters, along with the memories and family histories of African Americans recorded by the Works Progress Administration during the twentieth century, allow us to construct a fairly vivid portrait of what went on during those Sunday assemblies. We know that these were large gatherings; in various accounts, estimates of participants of African descent range from the hundreds to the thousands, with numerous Native Americans and white Europeans and Americans expanding the crowd. One of the most well known of these descriptions is in the journal of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, an English architect who spent time in New Orleans from 1818 to 1820. Latrobe observed “a crowd of five or six hundred persons, assembled in an open space or public square” who divided themselves into numerous circles of dancers and musicians.<sup>6</sup>

These “blacks” engaged in a repetitive, rhythmic, call-and-response chanting, accompanied by numerous styles of drums, a stringed instrument constructed from a

calabash, and various percussion instruments. Although Latrobe ultimately disparages the “exhibition,” he recognizes the process of cultural retention: “The allowed amusements of Sunday have, it seems, perpetuated here those of Africa among its former inhabitants.”<sup>7</sup> According to Jerah Johnson in *Congo Square in New Orleans*, the assemblies took place regularly until the mid-1800s, enjoyed a brief revival after the Union Army occupied the city in 1862, and ceased during the climate of racial repression that emerged in the American South after the Reconstruction Era. However, the dancing did not disappear altogether but carried on in “private settings in the city and on isolated plantations” for another thirty years.<sup>8</sup>

The polyrhythms, syncopation, and pulse beats that filled Congo Square are the heartbeat of the musical forms that emerged from New Orleans: ragtime, brass bands, jazz, [Mardi Gras Indian](#) chants, rhythm and blues, and funk. They also provide a link to the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, particularly Saint-Domingue/Haiti and Cuba, from which the slave trade brought Africans to New Orleans. From 1791 to 1804, plantation owners and enslaved Africans arrived from Saint-Domingue, fleeing the revolution that transformed the French colony into Haiti, the first independent black republic. Initially, the majority of these refugees fled to Oriente Province in eastern Cuba; by 1809 and 1810, however, these émigrés were expelled, and the vast majority of them sought refuge in New Orleans. Undoubtedly, during those Sunday gatherings these African people joined with those who had been in Louisiana carrying on the Congo Square tradition, intermingling their rhythmic variations, instruments, dances, and languages. The approaches to African spiritual belief systems—Voodoo that developed in New Orleans, Vodou from Saint-Domingue, and Santeria from Cuba—also likely came together there.

Examples of this rhythmic heritage can be found throughout the Smithsonian Folkways catalog. One of the earliest compilations to explore Pan-African drumming is folklorist Harold Courlander’s two-LP set, [African and Afro-American Drums](#) (1954). Courlander states in his liner notes that the recording “demonstrates not only the diverse drumming styles to be found in various parts of Africa, but also the great impact that African percussion traditions have had on other parts of the world.” After surveying traditional drumming from Nigeria, Congo, South Africa, Madagascar, Equatorial Africa, and Rwanda on the first disc, Courlander presents examples of African-based drumming from the United States, the Caribbean, and South America, including “[Haiti: Juba Dance Drumming](#),” “[Cuba: Lucumi](#),” “[The Virgin Islands: Bamboula Dance Drums](#),” and “[The United States: Jazz Drumming](#)” from [Baby Dodds](#).

Listening to these tracks, it is easy to imagine what it would have been like to wander from one drum circle to another on an antebellum Sunday evening in that square. The *bamboula* rhythm—an old dance referred to frequently in the early literature on the West Indies and survives in Haiti in name as the *baboule*—is particularly fitting because this was the signature rhythm with corresponding dance that was regularly performed in Congo Square, the antecedent to the second line parade rhythm that underpins the city’s distinctive jazz, rhythm and blues, and funk. Courlander’s inclusion of Dodds is also rather fitting. A master of the second line groove, he performed with the likes of [Jelly Roll Morton](#), [King Oliver](#), [Louis Armstrong](#), and [Sidney Bechet](#) and was a foundational influence on what it meant to play jazz drums. Certainly, the recording makes it easy to draw a link between Africa, Haiti, Cuba, Congo Square, and the twentieth-century jazz tradition.

That *bamboula* rhythm from Congo Square has also been linked to the music of [Louis Moreau Gottschalk](#) (1829–1869), America’s first world-renowned classical pianist and composer. He was born in the French Quarter to a Jewish British father and French mother, whose family emigrated from Saint-Domingue.

Although the inspiration for Gottschalk’s compositions, such as “[Bamboula](#)” and “[The Banjo](#),” has often been attributed to childhood visits to Congo Square, no documentation exists for any such visits, and it is more likely that he learned the Creole melodies and rhythms that inform these pieces from Sally, his family’s enslaved nurse from Saint-Domingue, who Gottschalk referred to as “La Nègresse Congo.”<sup>9</sup> Whether Gottschalk actually attended the Congo Square dances or not, his music is certainly emblematic of the crossroads that formed there. Born in New Orleans and reared in the culture of Saint-Domingue, he toured throughout the Caribbean and was particularly acclaimed in Cuba. Gottschalk was closely associated with the Cuban pianist and composer, Manuel Saumell Robredo (1818–1870), a master of the *contradanza*, widely popular dance compositions based on the African-derived habanera rhythm, a first cousin to the *bamboula*. It is likely that *contradanzas* composed by both Gottschalk and Saumell were an antecedent to the ragtime compositions of [Scott Joplin](#) and [Jelly Roll Morton](#).<sup>10</sup> The Smithsonian Folkways catalog features Gottschalk’s music, [Louis Moreau Gottschalk: American Piano Music Played by Amiran Rigai](#) (1992), and two collections of Creole songs that very likely reflect the music he learned as a youth from Sally: [Creole Songs of Haiti](#) (1954) by Haitian singer, dancer, and folklorist Emerante de Pradines and [Street Cries and Creole Songs of New Orleans](#) (1956) by Adelaide van Wey, a classically trained singer and folklorist.

One of the most familiar guideposts from modern New Orleans music back to the Congo Square crossroads comes from the legendary Library of Congress recordings that Alan Lomax made of pianist and composer Jelly Roll Morton, who asserted, “Of course, you have to have these little tinges of Spanish in it in order to play real good jazz.” The Spanish tinge he refers to is the habanera rhythm, the same rhythmic groove that rhythm and blues pianist Professor Longhair (Henry Roeland Byrd) called the “blues rhumba.”

There are many recordings in the Smithsonian Folkways catalog that bear witness to the legacy of Congo Square embedded in the sounds of modern New Orleans music. During the 1950s, Samuel Charters produced the five-album series [\*\*\*Music of New Orleans\*\*\*](#), a landmark collection that documents a wide range of the musical sounds of the city, including [\*\*\*brass bands\*\*\*](#), [\*\*\*dance hall jazz bands\*\*\*](#), solo piano, street musicians, and the first commercial recording of [\*\*\*Mardi Gras Indians\*\*\*](#). You can hear that rhythmic sensibility in the guitar of Snooks Eaglin on [\*\*\*New Orleans Street Singer\*\*\*](#) (1958) and the piano of Champion Jack Dupree on [\*\*\*The Women Blues of Champion Jack Dupree\*\*\*](#) (1961). Of course, that rhythmic legacy is manifest in its most essential form in the drumming of Baby Dodds on [\*\*\*Footnotes to Jazz, Vol. 1: Baby Dodds Talking and Drum Solos\*\*\*](#) (1946). The rhythms that were hammered out in Congo Square are also the foundation of the brass band music on [\*\*\*Doc Paulin’s Marching Band\*\*\*](#) (1980) and the post-[\*\*\*Hurricane Katrina\*\*\*](#) variations of the Hot 8, Liberty, and Treme brass bands found on Dr. Michael White’s [\*\*\*Through the Streets of the City\*\*\*](#) (2015).

Today, Congo Square is part of Louis Armstrong Park, marked by a series of embedded stone circles that pay homage to the drum circles that formed that crossroads two centuries ago. Throughout the park, a succession of sculptures recalls the ongoing legacy of those African people who gathered here: the drummers and dancers, the brass bands, gospel icon [\*\*\*Mahalia Jackson\*\*\*](#), [\*\*\*Mardi Gras Indian\*\*\*](#) Chief Tootie Montana, jazz masters [\*\*\*Buddy Bolden\*\*\*](#), [\*\*\*Sidney Bechet\*\*\*](#), and, of course, the city’s greatest musical ambassador, [\*\*\*Louis Armstrong\*\*\*](#). Congo Square is sacred ground. When the [\*\*\*Neville Brothers\*\*\*](#) sing, “some kind of something is going on down there,” they are declaring that what has happened in that place is beyond words. This is a crossroads that emanates an ineffable spirit and power, and Congo Square stands with our great landmarks in defining what it means to be American.

**Robert H. Cataliotti** is an award-winning music critic and historian and teaches at Coppin State University in Baltimore. He has written two books: *The Music in African American Fiction* and *The Songs Became the Stories: The Music in African American Fiction, 1970–2007*. He is the producer and annotator of [Classic Sounds of New Orleans from Smithsonian Folkways](#) (2010) and several other albums.

<sup>1</sup> The unique rhythmic groove that percolates beneath an array of New Orleans musical styles—brass band, Mardi Gras Indian, rhythm and blues/funk, and jazz—is called the “second line” rhythm. The audience members who follow the funeral procession and brass band to the cemetery are the “second line.” When the graveside ceremony is concluded, the participants “cut the body loose,” and the band kicks off an up-tempo number. So when a drummer plays this syncopated, funky march beat or when a dancer improvises to it, often with a handkerchief or umbrella held high, they are said to be “second linin’.”

<sup>2</sup> Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1992), 200.

<sup>3</sup> Freddi Williams Evans, *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans* (Lafayette, LA: University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2011), 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Henry Latrobe, *The Journal of Latrobe* (New York: D. Appleton, 1905).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 180–181.

<sup>8</sup> Jerah Johnson, *Congo Square in New Orleans* (New Orleans: Louisiana Landmarks Society, 1995), 47–48.

<sup>9</sup> S. Starr Frederick, *Bamboula! The Life and Times of Louis Moreau Gottschalk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 30 and 42.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.