THE MUSIC OF NEW ORLEANS

The Music of the Streets

The Music of Mardi Gras

RECORDED BY SAMUEL B. CHARTERS

Jackson Square, New Orleans

Ronald Clyne
New Orleans is a gentle, sprawling city lying between the Mississippi River and Lake Ponchartrain on the Mississippi delta in southern Louisiana. In its early years the city grew beside the river, and against the levees the small streets follow its great crescent curve. There were summer pleasure resorts on Lake Ponchartrain, and through the long weeks of summer excursion trains took the city out to the playgrounds and dance pavilions at the lake front. Excursion boats crossed the lake to other resorts on the north shore. On the river, upstream from the beginning of the river's bend, was a small quiet town called Carrollton. A street car went along St. Charles Avenue, through blocks of trees, out to the Carrollton station. But New Orleans has grown, and Carrollton is inside the city limits. The resorts have closed and beautifully landscaped houses stretch along the lake front. A few of the old weathered houses - "camps" - still sit on pilings along the lake, but they have been pushed to the east and west of the newer neighborhoods.

South of the city, across the river, are the lush bayous and swamps of the lower delta. To the east and west of the city the narrow highways pass through miles of semi-tropical swampland. There is a causeway across the lake now, but the country north of Ponchartrain is quiet farmland. Except for the broad, shining river the city is almost lost in its flat, green delta.

The city has been French, Spanish, and American, and despite 150 years of what is called - on the bronze decorations on the Canal Street lampposts - "American Domination", it is still in many ways an exotic, half-Americanized city. There is an awareness of a romantic past. The two old districts, the French and Spanish Vieux Carre and the American Garden District, are preserved in their original charm and beauty. French is still spoken by many of the older people, and the city's Catholicism has tended to emphasize its Latin backgrounds.

The city's remoteness and its colorful past have given it an easy self-assurance and a feeling of continuing tradition that is very different from anything else in America. There is an open disinterest toward contemporary art, music, and culture that dismays the enthusiastic outsider who moves to the city. There is almost as little conscious effort made to preserve the city's own cultural traditions. It is a relatively poor city, but it is a very relaxed city. This may be because even in the poorer neighborhoods the streets are lined with one story wooden houses, rather than large tenements. There is a feeling of spaciousness and sunlight. The weather, despite the hot summers, is beautiful. There is little of the slum tension that is very much there.

The intent was to include a fairly extended example of the various musicians, rather than group, musical activity, and it is therefore that was recorded was as much as possible the distinctive music of the city.

It was felt that any recording of the New Orleans churches would to some extent duplicate the fine recording of the Morning Star Baptist Church - on Burgundy Street in the Vieux Carre - done by Frederic Ramsey Jr. in 1954 and included in his magnificent Folkways series Music From The South; so the series is largely given over to secular material. An entire album is devoted to the music of the Eureka Brass Band, the last of the city's great brass bands. The Eureka in many ways sums up the essence of New Orleans music. There is a relaxed informality, a stunning individual brilliance, and a complete identification of the music with its audience. The music of the Eureka, tenor saxophone leader, is a definitive statement of the jazz heritage New Orleans has given the world. The final volume, through interviews with pioneer jazz musicians and musical examples, discusses at length this rich heritage.

Most of the performers are at least in outlook professional entertainers. The cities musical tradition is one of more or less professional, rather than group, musical activity, and it is these veteran performers who have best carried on the older styles. In each case the material used was chosen for its musicality as well as its place in the structure of New Orleans music. The intent was to include a fairly extended example of the various musicians, rather than a hurried moment of sound, so that their individuality and personal style could come through. If you'd like, think of this collection of material as a kind of musical set of postcard views of this city in the crescent of the Mississippi River. Here in all its variety and glory in the music of New Orleans.
THE MUSIC OF THE STREETS

The street serenaders of New Orleans are a colorful part of the city's life. They walk through the streets in the bright sunlight singing and playing, or stand in the evening shadows shouting spirituals. The shoe shine boys make up little songs to go with the rhythm of their shine rags. The vegetable men, lazily leaning against a post on their mule-drawn wagons, make songs out of their advertising calls. A heavy afternoon rain will send most of the singers indoors, but throughout the year, winter and summer, on a bright, clear day, the streets ring with music.

The picturesque Vieux Carre is the most popular neighborhood for most of the singers. They sing along Royal Street, St. Peter Street, and Bourbon Street, for the crowds of tourists. The shoe shine boys usually stay around Pirates Alley, behind the St. Louis Cathedral. Two blocks away, on Burgundy Street, there are vegetable peddlers and religious singers shouting for the crowded Negro apartment buildings and the families sitting in the sun on the warm afternoons. The corner of Canal and South Rampart Street is a transfer point for most of the busses going into the Negro neighborhoods, and for years the religious singer, Dave Ross, who has recorded for the Folkways L.P., Blind Willie Johnson and for Frederic Ramsey Jr.'s Folkways series Music from the South, sat on a camp stool under the drugstore awning singing for the crowds that passed him. Along Dryades Street there are singers mingling with the country people in town to shop at the cheap clothing stores and markets that line the street.

Singing on the streets is lonely, hard work. People hurry past, barely seeing you, jostling you as they pass. If you sing well enough to attract a crowd the police will tell you to move along. A stretch of bad weather will leave you without a dime. The music of most street performers becomes a mechanical repetition of familiar material that no one really listens to. It's hard to hear yourself, no one pays attention, and the amount even a good singer can collect is very low. One of the greatest of the street singers, Blind Lemon Jefferson, sang years ago, "I stood on the corner...almost bust my head...I couldn't earn me enough money to buy me a crust of bread."

All of the performers on this recording are or were playing on the streets of New Orleans between 1954 and 1958. They were recorded in their own homes, rather than on the street, and the novelty of performing for an attentive audience has given a vitality and richness to their music. The variety of the music is characteristic of this city of varied backgrounds and peoples. All the performers are Negroes, and, except for the young boy singing the "Hambone" and the vegetable peddlers on Band 1., are middle-aged and from the city, but here are religious shouts, country blues, and light classics, all from the streets of New Orleans.

SIDE 1, Band 1: STREET CRIES

Vegetable peddlers, the youngest about 12 years old. Recorded in Algiers, La. (across the river from New Orleans) August 26, 1957. (time 35")

These peddlers are typical of the young men who drive the vegetable wagons as a part-time or summer job. The shouting is simple and direct. They knew of the older, more musical cries of peddlers like Percy Randolph (Band 4.), but were unfamiliar with the vocal technique involved. One of the men held his hand against his cheek to "direct" the sound, but there was no other attempt to do anything but should loud.

SIDE 1, Band 2: LET GOD'S MOON ALONE

Sister Dora Alexander, vocal and tambourine. Recorded at 638 St. Peter St., March 8, 1958.

SISTER DORA ALEXANDER PHOTO BY LEONARD FLETTRICH

Sister Dora Alexander is a colorful street evangelist who makes a meager living singing on the streets of the Vieux Carre. Her songs are her own compositions, and she accompanies herself vigorously on a battered tambourine. The songs are in rough binary form; the "verse" an irregular chanted set of phrases contrasted with the more melodious singing of the "chorus." Times Done Changed as been in her repertoire for several years, but the impassioned Russia, Let God's Moon Alone was written the day after the launching of the Russian earth Satellite.

SIDE 1, Band 3: TIMES DONE CHANGED

Percy Randolph. Recorded in New Orleans in January, 1958 by Harry Oster. (time 1'35")

This is a superb street crier, with subtle vocal control, and a considerable repertoire of rhythmically complete cries. The cries are made with the front of the mouth, with very little lip movement. On first hearing they are difficult to understand, but the products he is selling are - in this order - coal, watermelon, freestone peaches, blackberries, and bananas.

SIDE 1, Band 4: STREET CRIES

Percy Randolph. Recorded in New Orleans in January, 1958 by Harry Oster. (time 1'35")

This is a superb street crier, with subtle vocal control, and a considerable repertoire of rhythmically complete cries. The cries are made with the front of the mouth, with very little lip movement. On first hearing they are difficult to understand, but the products he is selling are - in this order - coal, watermelon, freestone peaches, blackberries, and bananas.

SIDE 1, Band 5: WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS, MY OLD KENTUCKY HOME, WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN.

James Mitchell, musical saw. Recorded at 2113 S. Liberty St., August 7, 1957. (time 3'10")

James Mitchell is a blind man, large and proud, who plays in front of Kauffman's department store in the
colored district on Dryades Street every Saturday afternoon. His saw is an expensive cross cut hand saw, carried in a leatherette case; his violin bow is kept in beautiful condition, and he uses the best resin he can buy at the Werlein Music Store. He has a large repertoire which he plays throughout the afternoon. The saw, held across the knees and stroked with a violin bow has been from time to time a very popular folk instrument. It is limited, but a skilled player can play a chromatic octave, and Mitchell, at least, is able to play with a vibrato by shaking the knee that is pressed against the handle of the saw. He has been playing since about 1927.

SIDE I, Band 6: SHINE

Percy Randolph, vocal and shoe shine cloth. Recorded in New Orleans in January, 1958, by Harry Oster. (time 1')

Percy Randolph, the street crier of Band 4, works as a shoe shine boy, vegetable peddler, and itinerant harmonica player. For many years southern shoe shine boys have been famous for their rhythmic shoe shining and the little songs made up to go along with it. This is not so much a song as it is glorious self-advertisement. After hearing the exuberant description of this most excellent shoe-shine who could resist the cry "Shine!"

SIDE I, Band 7: LIEBESTRAUM

Frank Amica, guitar. Recorded at 2520 2nd St., February 28, 1958. (time 5'50")

Amica began playing for tips as a boy on the streets of the old restricted district, Storyville, during the first World War. The flavour of an older, more pretentious New Orleans is in his playing, but there is with it a wonderful relaxed rhythmic swing.

SIDE I, Band 8: HAMMBONE

Shoeshine boy, vocal and hand slapping. Recorded at the corner of Pirates Alley and Exchange Alley, September 3, 1957. (time 1')

The Hambone is a very popular rhythm dance done by show shine boys for the tourists in the Vieux Carre. The slapping is a complicated pattern done with both hands on the legs and chest, beginning with the backs of both hands slapping the left thigh. This boy, who was afraid to give his name, sang one of the standard sets of words which have a wide background in the American folk tradition.

SIDE I, Band 9: MEAN OLD FRISCO


Eaglin is an exciting performer, with a fine voice and a brilliant guitar style. Most of his songs have been learned from recordings over a period of many years, but he has sung and played his music until the style is his own. He plays the guitar without picks, using the back of his nails to strum the beat, picking the lead with his first finger, the bass with his thumb. The song is widely known in the South, but there is still considerable confusion as to the exact reference "Mean Old Frisco." Possible it is an early train lament, but years of repetition have dimmed its original meaning. This performance of Eaglin's is a superb example of mature vocal-guitar blues.
"Fat Tuesday" - a portrait of Mardi Gras Day.

Mardi Gras, creole French for "fat Tuesday", is the city's great carnival. Despite the thousands of tourists that come to see it Mardi Gras is a very personal, special season, and most of the tourists leave feeling vaguely disappointed, as though they'd missed something. Every spring, the day before Lent, New Orleans noisily rises to shout its individuality.

Though the parades last only about a week and a half, the formal carnival balls and parties begin early in the year, and the season lasts with mounting excitement until the moment before midnight on Mardi Gras night when the court of King Rex, the Lord of Misrule, and the court of the Krewe of Momus, traditionally the last club to have its parade, meet and officially end Mardi Gras. The day begins early in the morning, with the arrival of Rex on the river. As the whistles and fireworks are going off to celebrate his arrival his colored counterpart, King Zulu, begins his parade from the foot of Canal Street. In the uptown districts the Carnival clubs are out marching from bar to bar with their pick-up jazz brass bands. Bands of young colored men are roaming the streets dressed in Indian costumes, singing with tambourine accompaniment the traditional songs of Mardi Gras.

As the morning passes the crowds begin to gather on Canal Street to wait for the lavish Rex parade. The people from the Vieux Carre and a few of the tourists wear elaborate, impractical costumes; the New Orleanians loose practical outifts that can have two sweaters or a bathing suit under them, depending on the weather. In the crowd are street entertainers playing for dimes and nickels. By the late afternoon the parades have passed, and the uptown marching clubs are dancing to the ragged music of their thoroughly winded brass bands. With the early evening comes the Momus parade; then, as the city slowly falls silent, the crowds begin to disappear. Some of them pass by the auditorium to see the costumes of the colorful, jammed Rex Ball.

This is a musical portrait of a Mardi Gras day. The Indians, out on the streets at dawn, the street entertainers in the crowds at noon, the late afternoon dancing in the uptown neighborhoods, and the Krewe of Momus parading through the Vieux Carre. Mardi Gras day, Tuesday, March 5, 1957.

DAWN AND EARLY MORNING - THE INDIANS

SIDE II, Band 1: TO-WA-BAC-A-WAY

THE INDIAN RACE
through the winter darkness.

The dark, windy night at the corner of Canal and Rampart two blocks there was a small parade following us toward my apartment they are wandering the feathers reaching to the ground. Most of the men children came running out of doors. Voices were describes on Band 2, but by the afternoon the Indians dresses two or three feet high, trains around activity. The average age is from about 18 to 25, but there are a few older men in some of the better known tribes. They have in common a group of songs that have been a part of the Mardi Gras tradition for generations and a group of costumes that are rented from Costume rental shops along Dryades Street. The costumes are fantastically ornate, with great gaudy, sequined jackets, head­dresses two or three feet high, trains of dyed feathers reaching to the ground. Most of the men paint their faces and bodies.

At dawn, Mardi Gras day, the tribes are out on the streets searching for each other, as Jerome Paynes describes on Band 2, but by the afternoon the Indians are wandering the streets in groups of two or three, surrounded by honor­y princesses and enthusiastic tambourine players, each group a drunken joyous parade in itself.

It was impossible to record the groups successfully on the street; they were just not very coherent. Joe DeGrait, of the 2nd Ward Hunters, gathered this group of singers together, and they met me on a dark, windy night at the corner of Canal and Rampart Streets. As we walked up Burgundy Street toward my apartment they began singing To-Wa-Bac-A-Way. Heads appeared out windows; little children came running out of doors. Voices were shouting, "It's the Indians!" By the time we'd gone two blocks there was a small parade following us through the winter darkness.

The songs of the Indians have been known in New Orleans for many years. The New Orleans pianist, Jelly Roll Morton, remembered hearing them as a boy, and recorded a version of To-Wa-Bac-A-Way for the Library of Congress. The rhythm, a strongly accented Habanera beat, sounds characteristically West Indian, and there was considerable travel between the two areas in the 19th century. The responsive elements, the leaders cry and the chorus response, are certainly not characteristic of New Orleans musical styles, but are found in rural areas, especially in rural work song. The boys who were members of these tribes had an extensive knowledge of the state prison farm at Angola, La., and sang songs from the prison which were quite similar to the Indian material. The Indian songs are probably work song material which has been preserved in New Orleans for a long enough time to lose many of the rhythmic characteristics of the work song and to gain many of the rhythmic elements of the dance. The form, a simple call-response, has been carried on intact. The repertoire is extremely limited, but any of these songs can be sung without interruption for hours, if the lead singer has an imaginative flair. The "wards" mentioned in Red, White, and Blue Got The Golden Band are the districts of the city.

NOON

THE SIDEWALK ENTERTAINERS

SIDE II, Band 3: ON MARDI GRAS DAY

Vocal with accompaniment on home-made drum set. Singer known only as "Hank", recorded at the corner of Thalia and Liberty about noon March 5, 1957. (time 3’50’’)

This is a typical performance by one of the dozens of similar singers that entertain on the streets on Mardi Gras day. The drummer and singer, who was too drunk to remember his last name, played with considerable skill on a collection of beer cans nailed to a chicken coop, playing with rungs from a kitchen chair. The verse begins, "Who's that man ridin' that horse? Don't know his name but they call him the boss" is a work song element, which like the Indian material, has been used in New Orleans during the Mardi Gras season for many years. The phrase "Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die", is widely known throughout the South.

LATE AFTERNOON

THE BRASS BANDS

SIDE II, Band 4: BOURBON STREET PARADE

Brass Band. Recorded on Tchoupitoulas Street about 5 p.m. March 5, 1957. (time 3’)

By the end of the afternoon the brass bands have marched with their neighborhood Carnival club for about eight hours. The club marches to their headquarters and dances until about 6:30, when the members begin drifting home for dinner. The parades of the uptown clubs are a little known part of Mardi Gras Day, but the oldest of the clubs, the Jefferson City Buzzards, has marched since 1892. Their first float was a hearse pulled by a bunch of young men uptown with signs on it reading, "Died this year, but I'll vote three times next year." The clubs are neighborhood groups; some, like the Eleanore Club, named for their street. About twenty musicians had been with the club where this recording was done, making up two brass bands, but only about eight of the musicians were still able to
By the time the lodge finally reached its headquarters. These are hard jobs, but the pay is usually between $35 and $50 a man for the days marching.

PARADE OF THE GARDEN DISTRICT CARNIVAL CLUB

MUSICIANS VISIBLE - RICHARD MCLEAN, TRUMPET; ED SPEARS, TENOR; LOUIS KEPPARD, SOUSAPHONE; CAL BLUNT (LEFT) AND EDDIE MORRIS, TROMBONES.
PHOTO BY CHARLES MCNETT JR.

NIGHT
SIDE II, Band 5: THE PARADE OF THE KREWE OF MOMUS

WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN, MARGIE, AND SOUTH RAMPART STREET PARADE.

Recorded on Royal Street about 8 p.m., March 5, 1957. (time 2'30")

Royal Street is filled with shouting, waving crowds, dimly lit by the light of the oil torches - flambeaux - in the parade. The brass bands march by; some of the high school musicians wearing strings of beads thrown from the floats. The music comes to a ringing climax as the last band passes. At the end of the parade an Indian was stumbling along with the crowd, his clothes still soaked from an afternoon shower, his magnificent headdress in ruins. He was almost so drunk he couldn't walk, but he was moving through the streets smiling, singing to himself, "Hey .. hey .. to-wa-bac-a-way." Mardi Gras was over.