

# ROLL WITH IT

Brass Bands  
in the Streets of  
New Orleans



**MATT SAKAKEENY**

ARTWORK BY  
**WILLIE BIRCH**

# **ROLL WITH IT**

## **Refiguring American Music**

*A series edited by Ronald Radano and Josh Kun*

*Charles McGovern, contributing editor*



# **ROLL WITH IT**

Brass Bands  
in the Streets of  
New Orleans

**MATT SAKAKEENY**

With artwork by  
**WILLIE BIRCH**

Duke University Press   Durham and London   2013

© 2013 Duke University Press

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ☹

Designed by Heather Hensley

Typeset in Minion Pro by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sakakeeny, Matt, 1971–

Roll with it : brass bands in the streets of New Orleans /

Matt Sakakeeny ; with images by Willie Birch.

pages cm — (Refiguring American music)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8223-5552-6 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8223-5567-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Brass bands—Louisiana—New Orleans.

2. African American musicians—Louisiana—New Orleans.

3. Brass instrument players—Louisiana—New Orleans.

I. Birch, Willie. II. Title. III. Series: Refiguring American music.

ML1311.7.L8S34 2013

785.06509763'35—dc23

2013013827

Duke University Press gratefully acknowledges the support of the AMS 75 PAYS Endowment of the American Musicological Society, funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which provided funds toward the publication of this book. Tulane University also provided funds to commission the artwork used in the book.

"Roll With It" is a song composed by Tyrus Chapman and Glen Andrews of the Rebirth Brass Band.

You can check out music, images, and videos related to each episode on the "ReadingGuides" page at [www.mattsakakeeny.com](http://www.mattsakakeeny.com).

*The paintings in this book were not selected to illustrate the writing. The artwork and words are meant to be an artistic pairing. All pieces were created between 2000–2008, using charcoal and acrylic on paper. The pieces dating from 2003–2004 were created when Birch was artist-in-residence at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation.*

Frontispiece. *The Gang's All Here*. 2000. 60" × 48". © WILLIE BIRCH.

# CONTENTS

vii	<b>LIST OF ARTWORK</b>
ix	<b>PROLOGUE CROSSING THE THRESHOLD</b>
1	<b>INTRODUCTION FORWARD MOTION</b>
13	<b>CHAPTER 1 ONWARD AND UPWARD</b>
1.1	A Funeral Fit for a Duke
1.2	An Eventful History
1.3	Second Lining with Rebirth
1.4	Developments in the Tremé
1.5	The Bass Brothers
1.6	Lives in Motion
1.7	When This Life Is Over
1.8	Voices and Instruments
1.9	Life at the Top
69	<b>CHAPTER 2 CONSTRAINTS</b>
2.1	Down on the Corner
2.2	Where Culture Means Business
2.3	Bennie's Dilemma
2.4	The Business of Culture
109	<b>CHAPTER 3 PROGRESSIONS</b>
3.1	You Don't Want to Go to War
3.2	A Renaissance
3.3	Tradition on Parade
3.4	Music by Any Means Necessary
3.5	Productive Friction

143	<b>CHAPTER 4 VOICES</b>
4.1	Structural Violence, Interpersonal Violence, and Musical Articulation
4.2	Joseph “Shotgun” Williams
4.3	Why Dey Had to Kill Him?
4.4	Dinerral Jevone Shavers
4.5	Voices and Instruments at Dinerral’s Funeral
4.6	Voices Amplified, Muffled, and Distorted
4.7	Voices Lost and Found
179	<b>CONCLUSION ENGAGEMENTS</b>
187	<b>AFTERWORD</b>
	<b>IMAGE AND MUSIC IN THE ART OF WILLIE BIRCH</b>
	<i>Willie Birch and Matt Sakakeeny</i>
195	<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>
199	<b>APPENDIX</b>
	<b>LIST OF INTERVIEWS AND PUBLIC EVENTS</b>
201	<b>NOTES</b>
213	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>
227	<b>INDEX</b>

## LIST OF ARTWORK

ALL IMAGES BY WILLIE BIRCH

- FRONTISPIECE *The Gang's All Here* ii
- P.1 *Tuba Player on Villere Street* viii
- P.2 *Like Father Like Son* xiii
- I.1 *July 4th Birthday Celebration for Louis* xvi
- I.2 *Mule Leading Funeral Procession* 9
- 1.1 *Jazz Funeral for Big Moose* 12
- 1.2 *The Revolution Got Soul, Soul, Soul* 21
- 1.3 *Musician Sitting on Drum* 37
- 1.4 *Olympia (Old-Timer with Saxaphone)* 66
- 2.1 *No Tears for Ernie K-Doe* 68
- 2.2 *Dancing Nasty (Uncle Lionel Doing the Bambara)* 88
- 2.3 *The Last Mile of the Way (Mock Funeral)* 89
- 2.4 *The Leader (Michael White)* 106
- 3.1 *Second Line Parade (Females in White)* 108
- 3.2 *Three Musicians for Tom Dent* 121
- 3.3 *Steppin'* 124
- 4.1 *Children Watching Parade as Drummer Passes By* 142
- 4.2 *I Can Still Hear Buddy Bolden Play* 151
- 4.3 *Playing a Dirge for a Victim of Violence* 160
- 4.4 *A Fitting Farewell for Ed Buckner's Son Brandon (Unfinished Piece) [detail]* 176
- C.1 *Two Tubas Playing for the Crowd* 178
- C.2 *Brother with Straw Hat, Sunglasses, and Cross* 183
- A.1 *New Birth* 187
- A.2 *The Second Liner* 188
- APPENDIX.1 *Saxophone Player (Waiting for Parade)* 198





P.1 Tuba Player on Villere Street. 2003. 63" x 48". © WILLIE BIRCH.

## PROLOGUE

# CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

**O**n a sunny Sunday afternoon in November 2006 I stand with a few hundred others outside a New Orleans barroom, waiting for the Prince of Wales Social Aid and Pleasure Club to start their annual second line parade.<sup>1</sup> Prince of Wales is one of fifty or so clubs that organize these parades, in which the members dress in matching outfits and dance through their neighborhoods to the beat of a brass band. Throughout the year Prince of Wales holds meetings and fund-raisers at a neighborhood bar called the Rock Bottom Lounge, in the Uptown neighborhood where I have lived since 1997, all building up to this day.

My eyes are fixed on eight men in their twenties and thirties leaning against the brick wall of the Rock Bottom, in a strip of shade underneath the roof overhang. They mill about, in no particular hurry, until the tallest of them picks up a street-worn tuba from the sidewalk and the others gather around him with their instruments: two trumpets, two trombones, a saxophone, bass drum, and snare drum. When the first note is sounded, the doors of the Rock Bottom fly open and the Prince of Wales strut out one by one. This is the moment club members anticipate all year; they call it “crossing the threshold” or “coming out the door.” Men appear first in double-breasted red suits, gold fedoras, and matching shoes made of alligator leather, and then the Lady Wales dance out

in contrasting gold pantsuits with red berets, in each hand a large feathered fan with the words “PRINCE OF WALES, est. 1928.” The parade marshal blows his whistle, the musicians fall in step behind the club, and suddenly we are off.

The band and club members make up what is known as the first line, while the rest of us marching behind, and along the sides, make up the second line. Together we move through the backstreets, maneuvering through parked cars. Roving vendors wheel ice chests and yell “Ice cold beer. Get your water,” while others set up “car bars” on the roofs of pickup trucks parked at designated stops. Plumes of marijuana smoke fill the air. The Prince of Wales take up the center of the street, flanked by rows of men holding rope to clear their path. Young boys and girls crawl into the open space to dance, and the crowd on the other side of the rope pauses to cheer them on.

The band plays one song after another without pause for several blocks; the groove will not stop, cannot stay put, is restless and elastic. The sound beckons people out of their houses, and as we make our way past my house the parade is expanding. What can appear to be a uniform mass of bodies is actually rather diverse: Janine, a black pharmacist who owns the fully renovated house next door, dances next to Rock, another neighbor who lives in a run-down house with no electricity; white and black anthropologists, professional photographers, and journalists intermingle with others here for the “free concert.” And these identifications with race, class, and occupation can tell only so much about where we fit in the collective. Gerald Platenburg, one of the most active and visible dancers at the second line, works as an executive chef at a hotel restaurant; he is also a member of a Social Aid and Pleasure Club called Nine Times and, along with his fellow club members, is the author of a book called *Coming Out the Door for the Ninth Ward*. Gerald’s dancing is a perfect analogy of his identity: he is always in motion.

The music draws us together. Our pace is set by the bass drum, snare drum, and tuba, and we determine our degree of involvement based on our proximity to the band. Along the perimeter, black motorcyclists wearing matching leather jackets have room to roam, and riders on horseback seem to prance out of crevices in the urban landscape. Behind the band, in the loose crowd of marchers, a man confined to a wheelchair dances by tilting his chair backward and spinning in circles. In the immediate vicinity of the

Prince of Wales the action is more concentrated and intense. Gerald is dancing so close to the musicians that he has to duck under trombonist Jerome Jones's slide to avoid getting hit.

When we turn onto busy Magazine Street, police on motorcycle and horse patrols have blocked off the traffic. Gerald makes use of the extra space to twirl and jump while tourists pour out of local shops to catch a glimpse. He likes to dance alongside the band in what he calls the "side-show": "dancing on the sidewalk, jumping on cars, or on the railing of the project, sliding on poles, and just going wild," he wrote in his book. "The music just possesses me."<sup>2</sup>

The author and educator Kalamu ya Salaam observed:

The best dancers have a way of merging jerking with gliding. . . . They sometimes seem to be floating down the street, legs and arms all curves, no angles. Then suddenly, they seize up like they've been hit by live wire, or they drop to the ground so fast you think something's wrong. But then another moment later and they're back just floating again like nothing even happened.

Those of us whose dancing skills are more limited are also welcome as long as we participate: "Whatever you do, you just do it. . . . You don't have to have any talent or skill and you don't have to ask permission. Just join in and try to stay on the beat."<sup>3</sup>

The second line is all about participation, and sound is organizing our movement, working to bring us into synchrony. Some sounds are meant to be disruptive: second liners jump in the air and smack street signs with open hands, and hip-hop blares from the open windows of cars parked along the parade route. Other sounds are meant to augment the intensity of the music: the parade marshal directs the flow with rhythmic bursts of a whistle he wears around his neck, while a couple men hold cowbells or an empty bottle of Wild Irish Rose above their heads, banging out syncopated rhythms with a drumstick.

Underneath it all, forming the subterranean layer of the soundscape, is the music of the Hot 8 Brass Band. The band is a perpetual-motion machine, except not a machine but an assemblage of human beings who hold instruments in their hands and use them like tools to get people moving.<sup>4</sup> The Hot 8 switches to a new song, the tempo rises, and those of us nearest

the action whoop and shout in recognition. When the procession turns onto Louisiana Avenue, the band is playing an original song from the 2005 album *Rock with the Hot 8*, and some of us chant the refrain:

*It's real*

*We ain't talking no shit*

*Everybody jump when the Hot 8 hit!*

Bennie Pete anchors the parade with booming bass notes. He is an imposing presence, six-feet-six, over 350 pounds. That is why he was chosen to play the biggest brass instrument, back in sixth grade when he was already wearing a size 9 men's shoe and had a 38-inch waist. "I was just like I am now, I was sticking out," he told me when we first met in 2006. The band director took one look at him and assigned him the tuba. Now he is in his thirties, and everyone recognizes Bennie for his tuba playing. "Hey, Big Tuba!" they greet him when he's taking a break between songs.

Technically Bennie's instrument is not a tuba but a sousaphone, and though the term *tuba* is used more often—as evidenced by the nicknames "Big Tuba," "Tuba Fats," and "Tuba Phil"—the distinction is telling. In the 1890s the bandmaster John Philip Sousa commissioned the new instrument because the tuba was too cumbersome to march with, and of course it is not possible to march with a string bass, so the sousaphone was key to enabling the mobility of marching bands. Because the development of the New Orleans brass band tradition occurred in dialogue with emerging styles of black popular music (traditional jazz, swing, bebop, R&B, soul, funk, hip-hop) that increasingly emphasized the lower spectrum, the sousaphone came to be featured more prominently in musical arrangements and came to distinguish black brass band music in New Orleans from other styles and places.<sup>5</sup> So while Bennie anchors the syncopated grooves of the rhythm section with short melodic fragments, or "riffs," that are associated with funk and hip-hop, he can move people, literally, in ways that James Brown or Jay-Z could not.

The dense web of rhythm created by the adjunct percussionists is occasionally interrupted by a sputtering drumroll from Dinerral Shavers, a small man in an oversized white T-shirt with a silver cross medallion and a snare drum strap over his shoulders. Dinerral's powerful arms are working overtime, but his eyes never look down; he is constantly scanning the action around him while keeping in step with Bennie and bass drummer Harry



**P.2** *Like Father  
Like Son.* 2001.  
57" × 42".  
© WILLIE  
BIRCH.

Cook to keep the crowd moving. The rhythm section—Bennie, Dinerral, and Harry—is responsible for maintaining synchrony and maximizing intensity, and even at leisurely tempos their rhythmic activity has a way of “up-tempoing slow music,” as Gerald described it to me.

About a month after the Prince of Wales parade, at a concert at the House of Blues nightclub, I witnessed Dinerral’s ingenuity in bringing together martial rhythms, the syncopated shuffle of traditional New Orleans brass bands, and hip-hop beats. The show was billed as a “Brass Band Blowout” and was sponsored by KMEZ-FM (“Old School and Today’s R&B”), and in between bands DJ Captain Charles kept the audience dancing with a seamless mix of contemporary hip-hop (e.g., Beyoncé’s “Irreplaceable”) and local music (e.g., Lil’ Rascals Brass Band’s “Knock with Me—Rock with Me”). Though the crowd was made up mostly of black New Orleanians familiar with brass band music, in any stationary setting the physical separation between audience and performer and the deafening sound system have the potential to limit participation and encourage passive spectatorship. On-

stage Dinerral works to overcome his surroundings, augmenting his drum setup with a tambourine, cowbell, wood block, and cymbal in order to replicate the second line. This level of multitasking creates complex polyrhythmic grooves, broken up by short blasts, like the one near the beginning of Dinerral's song "Get Up," when a space is left for him to play a drumroll that doubles in rhythmic value and rises in volume before landing with a *crash!* of the cymbal. "Cold style. Like an octopus," is how trombonist Jerome Jones summed up Dinerral's approach.

Since seeing the Hot 8 at the Prince of Wales parade I had reached out to Bennie, asking if I could interview him for a radio segment I was producing. He obliged, appearing precisely at the arranged time, positioning himself in front of a microphone, leaning back in an office chair, and flashing a modest smile while no doubt sizing me up.

In a high, genial voice he spoke for two and a half hours, unraveling an epic narrative of nomadic connections between seemingly detached events. He spoke with gratitude about the pleasure he brought to audiences on the street and onstage. ("It's just like a 'feel-good' music," is how he described the New Orleans brass band tradition.) He spoke with modest pride about the Hot 8's original hip-hop-inflected compositions that have expanded the traditional repertoire of brass band music. ("We try to mix it up a little bit.") He spoke with anger of the gap between the cultural capital of the brass band as an icon of New Orleans culture and the economic capital doled out by nightclubs, festivals, and Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs. ("I'm just tired of being a damn good cheap act.") And he spoke with pain about the loss of three of his band members, including trombonist Joseph Williams, who was gunned down by police officers in 2004 at the age of twenty-two, and of the difficulty of performing at their funerals. ("I felt I had to play, no matter how bad I felt—sad, hurt, wanting to cry, crying—I had to play because I owed him that.")

What I could not have known at the time was that Bennie was leading me into topical areas—the power of the brass band to move people, the debates over tradition and innovation, the promises and pitfalls of the cultural economy, the power of music as a mediating voice in interpersonal and structural violence—that would provide the core themes of this book. I also could not have known that, within a few weeks, Dinerral would become the fourth member of the Hot 8 to die too young, when he took a bullet apparently intended for his stepson, Thaddeus, leaving behind a wife and a son, a

mother and three sisters, and a band of young men who had grown up with him and loved him.

So it was that two months after first seeing Dinerral perform, I was watching Bennie Pete and dozens of musicians from every brass band in the city lead a funeral procession in his honor. In a New Orleans jazz funeral, friends and family of the dead march from the church to the burial site, their bodily movement and emotional state governed by the musicians. First, the procession moves slowly and deliberately to the sounds of sacred dirges; then, at a significant location, traditionally the place of burial, the band strikes up an up-tempo spiritual and the mournful march is transformed into a festive parade. The music that structures the funeral is virtually all instrumental, performed on trumpets, trombones, saxophone or clarinet, tuba, bass drum, and snare drum.<sup>6</sup> The sound is intended to communicate to the living and to the dead without recourse to language.

The intensity of emotion at a jazz funeral, especially for a young musician, underscores its status as the most sacred, profound, and traditional form of local black culture. And yet playing for funerals is a routine activity for all brass band musicians, a momentous event that closely resembles mundane events of little consequence. Whatever emotional distress the various members of the Hot 8 were under after sending off Dinerral, they had to put it behind them and go about their usual business, playing a birthday party at a daiquiri bar before sundown.

The experiences of New Orleans musicians like those in the Hot 8 Brass Band say something about the vitality of local black culture. They also say something about the insecurities of life for many in urban centers across the United States at the start of the twenty-first century, a perilous state of unending limbo that has been described as *precarity*.<sup>7</sup> There is much to celebrate here in the way that these young men use tradition to provide people with a sense of community through music, their success in reconfiguring tradition to resonate with contemporary experience, and their ability to accumulate status and earn a living by playing music in diverse contexts. But there is also much to condemn in the way they remain vulnerable to various forms of risk. This book follows these musicians as they mobilize across these two sides of the same coin. As a song by the Rebirth Brass Band repeats over and over, the lesson is to “roll with it.”





1.1 July 4th Birthday Celebration for Louis. 2004. 75" x 60". © WILLIE BIRCH.

## INTRODUCTION

# FORWARD MOTION

**I**n the summer of 1997 I was working as a sound engineer for the Smithsonian, traveling up and down the Mississippi River on assignment with the PBS documentary *River of Song* when our crew arrived in New Orleans. Though this was the final destination in our travelogue of the Mississippi, I cannot say I fully grasped the magnitude of New Orleans's reputation as a musical city. That was about to change because I had just accepted a job with a public radio program based in the French Quarter and would relocate to New Orleans in a few months. In retrospect, the trip was kind of a teaser for a new life I was about to begin and an initiation into the domain of local culture that would become an integral part of this life.

For one of the scenes we recorded a concert by the Soul Rebels at Joe's Cozy Corner in the Tremé neighborhood. I remember lugging audio equipment through the cramped front barroom at Joe's and into the back room that served as a makeshift performance area, with two folding tables, a space in the rear for the band, and room for dancing in between. Cramped in a corner, rubbing shoulders with an energetic crowd, steadying the table that held the recording equipment while someone climbed up to dance, I was feeling a mix of shock and excitement that I would soon be living in a place where such an event was even possible, let alone

routine. Out front, Joe and two other bartenders served drinks to patrons who saw no particular reason to get up off their stools and venture back to listen.

I was twenty-six and going through the kinds of transitions typical for that age. A short, long-haired, white guitarist from Worcester, Massachusetts, a ragged postindustrial city, I had grown up playing rock music and then attended conservatory to study classical guitar and audio engineering. My embrace of “serious” music may have been subconsciously motivated by my grandfather and namesake, Mitri Sakakeeny, a Syrian American who worked in the textile mills as a child and followed a lifelong path to middle-class assimilation. Regardless, an internship in Europe making recordings of elite musicians sent me packing, first to make documentaries at the Smithsonian Museum of American History and then as an engineer and producer for the weekly radio program *American Routes*. After moving to New Orleans with my girlfriend Alex, I spent six years familiarizing myself with the local music scene, going to shows and recording interviews with musicians by the program’s creator and host, Nick Spitzer.

I have vague, unprocessed memories of encountering brass bands in those years. The sound of the brass band ensemble permeates daily life in New Orleans to a degree that, like many New Orleanians, I took it for granted. Out running errands on a Saturday morning, Alex and I might stop at an intersection so a jazz funeral procession could pass by, the mourners marching in step to the tap of the snare drum, the thud of the bass drum, and the boom of the tuba. When a tricked-out Monte Carlo with shiny chrome hubcaps drove down our street, there was nothing unusual about the sound of trumpets, trombones, and saxophones blaring out of its open windows. And when we got married in 2000, it was common sense to have a brass band lead us on a ceremonial parade through the French Quarter. In 2002 I recorded a jazz funeral for Harold Dejan, which left an indelible impression on me, solidifying my recognition of the power of local culture and brass band music. Still, if you had told me then that I would spend years of my life researching and writing a book about brass band musicians, their performances, and their experiences, I would have laughed.

I came to black music by way of blues guitar playing, listening sessions at *American Routes*, and excursions to fife-and-drum picnics in the Mississippi hill country, jook joints on the outskirts of Memphis, zydeco dances in the bayou, and habitual outings in my adopted hometown. There was more

to it, though, for my attraction to black music was motivated by a fascination with race, informed by the racial polarization I witnessed in my actual hometown as well as my father's liberal musings on morality and injustice from the perspective of an ethnic minority, of which my classes in public schools and conservatory taught me little. In 2001 I decided to go back to school at Tulane University, initially researching the music of Mardi Gras Indians and then writing a thesis on J&M Studios, where virtually every New Orleans rhythm and blues and soul record was made. I found New Orleans music equally as exotic as classical music: radically different, of course, and far more socially inclusive, but with a comparable learning curve regarding the role of music in creating a sense of shared identity and retaining a cultural connection between the past and the present. Then there were the associations with marginalization and resistance, which, after reading authors such as Amiri Baraka, Albert Murray, Samuel Floyd, Charles Keil, and Ronald Radano, I began to detect not only in the words of spirituals, soul, and hip-hop but also in the pleasurable and seemingly innocuous social dance music that surrounded me.<sup>1</sup>

In 2003 I entered a PhD program in the anthropological study of music at Columbia University that led me to reexamine my experiences in New Orleans. New Orleans music is not only a form of expressive culture; it is also a site where competing social, political, and economic vectors intersect; New Orleans musicians cannot be reduced to a collective of tradition-bearers once their individual experiences are accounted for; and New Orleans as an inscrutable place is nevertheless a thoroughly American urban center with all of the poverty, racial marginalization, segregation, and other problems that characterize postindustrial cities. In my last year of study, just as I was preparing grant applications to fund fieldwork in New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina struck, challenging me to contextualize local culture within much larger political structures. It was then that the brass band parade presented itself as a point of intersection for my main interests: race, power, and music.

This was by no means an ethnographic "discovery" of a hidden cultural tradition; to the contrary, New Orleans brass bands have been popularized through recordings, festival appearances, and concert tours and have been the subject of continuous scholarly study and media reportage.<sup>2</sup> It was precisely the music's ubiquity and magnetism that drew me in; the brass band is a sonic identifier of the city, a musical icon that is indelibly linked to race and to place, and the sound is always there, waiting around every corner.

Upon returning to New Orleans in August 2006, I began talking with brass band musicians, attending parades and concerts, and eventually collaborating on public programs, and it was through these encounters that my ideas about New Orleans music were most profoundly revised and expanded.

The protagonists of this book are a dozen or so people who happen to spend their time, make their living, and articulate their experiences playing music. These musicians share qualities that evidence their collective identity. They are all black, they are all men, and most came of age in the post-civil rights period (sometimes referred to as the “hip-hop generation”). So in one, very limited sense, this book is an addition to a long line of studies of expressive cultural practices among urban black men in the United States.<sup>3</sup> However, I align my research with recent critical race studies that stand as a challenge to an intellectual lineage of “ghetto” studies projecting a “culture of poverty” and a hapless “underclass,” which have circulated widely in public discourse. Beginning at the level of the microsocial—the words and actions of musicians I have interacted with—I then evaluate how their experiences relate to macroeconomic and political forces.

These musicians are from New Orleans and are members of three of the city’s most prominent brass bands: Rebirth, the Soul Rebels, and the Hot 8. As such, they share qualities that evidence their collective culture. In furthering the parading tradition, they are ambassadors of a legacy that stretches back to the emergence of jazz at the turn of the twentieth century, and further, to slave dances in Congo Square near the French Quarter. Because the brass band parade has become a traveling symbol of local black culture, musicians have marched off the backstreets and into concert halls, festival grounds, and recording studios. In another sense, then, this book extends the study of New Orleans as an exceptional place and of music as the ultimate barometer of the city’s uniqueness.<sup>4</sup> Where else, I wondered that first time I saw the Soul Rebels at Joe’s Cozy Corner, do young black Americans continue to play instruments and dance to live music as a thoroughly unremarkable part of their everyday activities? Virtually nowhere, I reckoned, and still do.

Yet my investment in the idea of New Orleans exceptionalism has changed character over time. The experiences of New Orleans musicians offer a localized case study of the national and global transaction of black culture that is part of an equally deep and dark history of struggle for human rights and equal citizenship. Their stories speak not only to the power of

local culture but also to the uneven terrain that characterizes U.S. urban centers in the post-civil rights period, particularly for black men. Their status as dual citizens—exceptional icons celebrated as culture-bearers and unremarkable subjects whose lives and livelihoods are forever at risk—makes them ideally positioned to diagnose relations of power.

As the foundation upon which my study rested began to shift—problematized by scholarship, politicized by tragedy, and humanized by intimacy—my research became less directed, more improvisational, and messier. I could no longer confine my “data” within a theoretical framework (expressive culture in a particular place) while other frameworks (race, class, economics of culture, transformation of tradition, interpersonal violence, urban restructuring) kept intervening, redirecting, and reframing my course of study. This topical expansiveness came about as a result of a narrowing in subject focus: the handful of people I interacted with consistently, the diverse experiences that they shared with me, and their public lives as working musicians formed the central organizing principle of the book. Because brass band musicians in New Orleans are virtually all men, I have focused on their experiences in relation to public discourse and media representations of urban black men as a “problem” category, but women are present and active at every turn: at home, in church, as members of social clubs, as community leaders, in performance venues, and occasionally onstage.<sup>5</sup> These people became the frame, and within the frame there was nothing resembling a still life, for we were all in perpetual motion.

During the period of most intensive fieldwork, from 2006 to 2008, I caught people at parades and concerts, conducting research that often intersected with my work in radio. Though I was no longer working for *American Routes* regularly, in November 2006 I produced a segment on brass bands that led to my first recorded interviews with the bandleaders Bennie Pete of the Hot 8, Philip Frazier of Rebirth, and Lumar LeBlanc of the Soul Rebels. Soon after, I also reached out to bass drummer Keith Frazier of Rebirth to set up an interview, and by the end of the year I was helping snare drummer Derrick Tabb to launch an afterschool music program, Roots of Music. When my advisor Michael Taussig came to visit we were able to attend a jazz funeral, a second line parade, a nightclub concert, and a parade exhibition at Harrah’s Casino in the space of two days.

When drummer Dinerral Shavers was murdered in December 2006, I decided to file a report for the National Public Radio program *All Things*

*Considered*, nervously phoning his bandleader Bennie to ask if he would be willing to share his reaction to Dinerral's killing with a radio audience. On a Wednesday night in the empty *American Routes* studios, Bennie and Hot 8 trombonist Jerome Jones allowed me to tap into the raw emotions of a tragic moment. I don't know how to describe the feeling in that room, but listening back to the recording I can recapture some of the intensity in the intonation, timbre, pitch, and cadence of their voices and the silence of the pauses. When discussion turned to the preparations for Saturday's funeral, Bennie took a long time to respond, sighing and rubbing his eyes with fatigue before answering in a soft, low voice: "I don't know. It's still unknown to me, man. It's still like it ain't real. It never really sunk in with us."

Our conversation that night wound through what would become the central themes of this book—agency, subjectivity, mobility—by way of another: *voice*. Voice can refer to the act of talking or singing; it can describe the sound made by musicians through their instruments; and it can serve as a symbol of subjectivity, of the basic capacity to have a voice and the basic right to use it. When talking with me about playing a jazz funeral for his friend and bandmate, Bennie necessarily uses his voice to communicate words and emotions. What he is describing is another sort of voice: speaking to his lost friend through music without language or music in which language is but one of several layers of semantic content. Finally, voice is invoked as a metaphor for agency; when Bennie leads a procession of predominantly black New Orleanians through public spaces where lynchings, race riots, segregation, and gentrification have all taken place, the actions of musicians and marchers "give voice" to these submerged histories. Throughout the pages that follow, these multiple meanings of voice are shown to be inseparable. In a performance such as that of the spiritual "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" at Dinerral's jazz funeral, each voice is present: the second line marchers sing the sacred text over the sound of instruments in a ritual procession that symbolizes a communal voice.<sup>6</sup>

What can this polyphony of voices tell us about race, power, and music? Brass band musicians are agents in the public sphere who utilize voices and instruments as technologies for producing subjectivity, identity, and culture. Their musical practices are forms of social action, and when evaluated as such they offer insight into *agency* as the exercise of, or against, power. Parades and musical events are mobilized by people committing verifiable acts, people "exerting some degree of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed," writes the sociologist William Sewell Jr. of

agency, “which in turn implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree.”<sup>7</sup> The anthropologist Sherry Ortner suggests that ethnographers studying living people have particular insight into the “dynamic, powerful, and sometimes transformative relationship between the practices of real people and the structures of society, culture, and history.”<sup>8</sup> Music is one way that the people in this study came to know themselves as New Orleanians, black Americans, and cultural icons.

The actions and voicings of musicians led me to reconceive my study as about *subjectivity*. I mean this less in the romantic philosophical sense of musicians as creative individuals, or the classic folkloric sense of musicians as undifferentiated carriers of culture, than in the contemporary anthropological sense of individuals as subjects and agents of power, the “vulnerable, failing, and aspirational human beings” whom the anthropologists João Biehl, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman assess as “at once a product and an agent of history.”<sup>9</sup> The contributors to their book *Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations* put forth a series of “cultural analyses that make visible differences of interests, access, power, needs, desires, and philosophical perspectives” among individuals situated within hierarchies of power.<sup>10</sup>

Human agency and subjectivity are measurable in voices material and metaphorical, musical and verbal, including my own voice as a scholar, journalist, client, and curator of New Orleans music. As is typical of anthropological and ethnomusicological studies, my voice resonates loudest when retelling and reframing the stories of others that arose in fieldwork, but in this case the field encompasses a diverse set of engagements—radio segments, public programs, class visits, and performances—that constitute my daily life in New Orleans.

Also in this network are fellow anthropologists and researchers who share an engagement with local culture and collaborate on events and programs. When I met Helen Regis in 2006 at the parade described in the prologue I was already familiar with her research on Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs such as Prince of Wales. At a parade later in the season, Helen (an anthropologist at Louisiana State University) introduced me to Rachel Breunlin (an anthropologist at the University of New Orleans), and the following year we coordinated a mixed panel at the Society for the Anthropology of North America conference in New Orleans. The panelists were Hot 8’s bandleader Bennie Pete, Social Aid and Pleasure Club Task Force members Tamara Jackson and Troy Materre, and House of Dance and Feathers museum curator Ronald W. Lewis. Rachel, who codirects the Neighborhood



Story Project, and Helen, who helped found the Porch, a cultural organization in the Seventh Ward neighborhood, worked to make the event a true collaboration. They also provided me with a model for public engagement, shrinking the distance that can characterize ethnographic relationships in the field.<sup>11</sup> Rachel asked Bennie to have the Hot 8 play at her wedding on the same weekend as the conference, and after my wife and daughter and I socialized with the band, they played a raucous celebration with Rachel and her husband, Dan, dancing with Troy and Gerald and the other members of the Nine Times.<sup>12</sup>

By this time I had finished my dissertation and taken a job in the Department of Music at Tulane University, ending any semblance of compartmentalization in my work, home, and social lives. At Tulane I invite musicians to give workshops and lead class discussions on campus, and I offer service learning courses that put my students in contact with young musicians at the Roots of Music afterschool program. As a cultural intermediary, I am sometimes called upon to hire bands for gigs, including academic conferences, or interview musicians at public programs. The thing I do most often is attend second line parades and brass band concerts with family, friends, and an endless stream of guests (including not a small number of ethnomusicologists and anthropologists).<sup>13</sup> These are not excursions peripheral to my work but rather are integral to it, appearing in these pages alongside the kinds of rituals that dominate the anthropological record, such as the funeral procession for Harold Dejan, the bandleader for the Olympia Brass Band who passed away at age ninety-three in 2002 (episode 1.1), or a performance by the Free Agents Brass Band at a back-a-town bar (episode 3.1).

These are each *events* that take place in a resonant public sphere, including what the anthropologist Sally Falk Moore terms “diagnostic events” that “reveal ongoing contests and conflicts and competitions and the efforts to prevent, suppress, or repress these.”<sup>14</sup> Throughout her studies of Tanzania, Moore draws attention to the actions of individuals in relation to larger structures, so that her observations of events as “part of the cultural construction of part of a society at a particular time” are then situated within and against “larger processual implications of the local moment.”<sup>15</sup> Hurricane Katrina was, of course, a diagnostic event that directly impacted everyone in this book, but the full significance of Katrina can be measured only in context, which for those most vulnerable to devastation has been shaped by histories of enslavement, segregation, disempowerment, and curtailed free-