

John Paige and Mary McVeigh

## Planning for Jazz

*“Jazz is hereby designated as a rare and valuable national American treasure to which we should devote our attention, support and resources to make certain it is preserved, understood and promulgated.”*

*Concurrent Resolution 57, 100th U.S. Congress, 1987.*

The above resolution expressed congressional interest in jazz. This interest in jazz by Congress was followed in 1994, when Public Law 103-433 in 1994 was passed establishing the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park after a special resource study was conducted by the National Park Service regarding ways to preserve and commemorate New Orleans Jazz. The park legislation required the National Park Service to prepare a *General Management Plan* for the new park. This plan provides general guidance for NPS managers for a period of 10 to 15 years regarding how to protect the park’s cultural and natural resources while providing opportunities for visitors to understand, enjoy, and appreciate the park.

One of the greatest challenges of the planning effort was to encourage the various diverse groups that contributed to jazz to tell their stories. To understand the complex story of jazz, it is important to go back to the colonial period in Louisiana history. New Orleans was founded by the French in 1718, ceded to the Spanish in 1763, returned to the French in 1803 and almost immediately sold to the United States in the Louisiana Purchase. This resulted in a rich amalgam of cultures being formed in the city. The Creole culture was Catholic and both French- and Spanish-speaking. The American culture was Protestant and English-speaking. During the colonial period, enslaved West Africans were brought to the city so that at the beginning of the period of American dominion

nearly 50 percent of the city’s population was of varied African descent, both free and enslaved.

After the Louisiana Purchase, English-speaking Anglo- and African-Americans moved into New Orleans. The newcomers began settling upriver from Canal Street away from the already populated Vieux Carre. These settlements extended the city boundaries and created the “uptown” American sector.

In the early-19th century various African and African-American elements routinely began to be incorporated into the musical culture of the city and accepted as an integral part of the culture. Likewise, many African Americans, especially the educated free people of color, participated in musical activities considered European in origin, thereby blurring many of the cultural differences that existed in other southern cities.

Also, during the 19th century German and Irish immigrants came to the city in greater numbers. The more affluent settled in and adjacent to the central business district, while the less prosperous settled in working class areas along both upriver (Irish Channel) and downriver (Lower Marigny and Bywater) portions of New Orleans. After the Civil War, and especially at the turn of the century, large numbers of Italians and other southern European immigrants arrived in New Orleans and moved into the lower Vieux Carre. Many of these immigrants also settled upriver and downriver working-class neighborhoods and some newer ones being developed in “back-of-town” areas away from the river, interspersed with existing African-American neighborhoods.

Each ethnic group contributed to the very active musical environment in the city, and before the 20th-century African Americans mas-

*Odd Fellows and Masonic Dance Hall/Eagle Saloon (South Rampart & Perdido Streets) illustrates an early jazz site associated with Louis Armstrong and other early jazz musicians.*



*A jazz parade sponsored by a Social Aid and Pleasure Club features a member of the Jet Setter parading to the music of the Little Rascals Brass Band.*

quering as Indians during the Carnival season, and especially on Mardi Gras Day, began to appear in the neighborhoods. Their demonstrations included drumming and call-and-response chanting that was strongly reminiscent of West African and Caribbean music.

New Orleans music was greatly influenced by the popular musical forms that proliferated throughout the United States following the Civil War, and marching bands expanded their already enormous popularity in the late 1880s. There was a growing national interest in syncopated musical styles influenced by African-American-inspired forms such as the cakewalk and minstrel tunes as well as the syncopated rhythms of Gypsy, Jewish, Celtic, Viennese, Mexican, and Cuban music. By the 1890s syncopated piano compositions, called ragtime, created a popular musical sensation, and brass bands began supplementing the standard march repertoire with syncopated “ragtime” marches.

While many organizations in New Orleans used brass bands in parades, concerts, political rallies, and funerals, African-American mutual aid and benevolent societies had their own expressive approach to funeral processions and parades, which continue to the present. Sometime before 1900, African-American neighborhood organizations known as social aid and pleasure clubs also began to spring up in the city. Similar in their neighborhood orientation to the mutual aid and benevolent societies, the purposes of social and pleasure clubs were to provide a social outlet for its members, provide community service, and parade as an expression of community pride. This parading provided dependable work for musicians and became an important training ground for young musical talent.

By this time, New Orleans dance music was becoming more distinctive with its use of improvisation and instruments associated with brass bands. This music of the people became jazz and in 1917, the original Dixieland Jazz Band cut the first commercial jazz recording and jazz New Orleans style became a national craze. New Orleans is still deeply associated with jazz and traditional as well as many other forms of jazz can be found in the city.

National Park Service involvement with jazz began in 1990 when Congress directed the National Park Service to conduct a special resource study on the “origins and history of early jazz” in New Orleans. The legislation for this



study recommended that “the unique contributions” made by neighborhood social and pleasure clubs and support for second line bands be incorporated into the study. As a result of this legislative direction, research and information gathering was done not only on the history of the music, but also about the history of the neighborhoods and the ongoing jazz-related activities. The results of this research demonstrated the link between the historic importance of mutual aid and benevolent societies, brass bands, and the Mardi Gras Indians in the evolution of jazz and their ongoing activities today. These communities and organizations continue the parade tradition today much the same as they did 100 years ago. The special resource study identified many of these communities, clubs and organizations. Public involvement for this study was very formal and held in public hotels, libraries, universities, and complexes.

The legislation for creating the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park directed that the new park provide the visitor with live jazz interpretive and educational information about jazz-related programs held in the metropolitan area. It also permits the park to provide tech-

*A jazz class at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts illustrates the ways in which the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park provides jazz education programs.*



nical assistance and grants, enter into cooperative agreements, and promote a broad range of education activities relating to the history of early jazz. In order to begin formulating the plan, it was felt that the best approach would be to meet individually with the various communities, clubs, societies, Indian tribes, bands and organizations. At each meeting, individual groups were asked how they would like their particular contribution to the origins of jazz related to visitors and if their group wanted to be involved in any of the new park's programs. If the responses were affirmative, the groups were asked what the park could do to assist them in continuing their historic jazz-related activities.

These communities take great pride in their particular area's contributions to the origins of jazz. Several communities claim their particular area actually "birthed" jazz, and that their particular area contained the most well-known, frequented, and famous jazz historic sites and that their community is the most historic site. The culture of many neighborhoods is very close knit, extremely stable, and self-reliant. There is a strong mistrust for outsiders. Residents can be uncomfortable at a formal meeting, unwilling to travel to a location outside of the community, and be reluctant to express their ideas openly. Therefore, the team, with assistance from the superintendent and staff, and members of the New Orleans Jazz Commission began to identify community leaders who could serve as hosts and liaisons for the Park Service. Information on the most appropriate locations, times, and circumstances that would induce residents to attend

meetings was gathered. As a result, one meeting was held at a senior center, another was held at a local fraternal lodge. Meetings were held at community colleges, throughout the city with individual groups, and one meeting was held specifically for brass bands, and social aid and pleasure clubs.

All of these meetings were very informal. The superintendent and planning team sat down with the attendees in a discussion format. No one from the audience was expected to walk to a microphone (although it was available if they chose to). This information approach became a

lively discussion after the first 30 minutes or so, with members of the audience interjecting not only their ideas and concerns, but providing the interjection on the people, places, incidents, and stories of "jazz greats."

The study team also pursued very broad strategies to reach the communities—press releases, hand carried meeting notices, requests for distribution to the commission, revisiting and re-acquainting the new team with previous meeting site managers, question/answer sessions on the local jazz radio station, meetings at historically black colleges and universities, and placing information on the study and the draft alternatives in 12 libraries throughout the city.

All of these efforts paid dividends. The park now has a better understanding of the what jazz stories are important to tell, which neighborhoods are more supportive of the park, and the visiting public will gain a greater understanding and appreciation of the stories behind jazz music. The General Management Plan for New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park will be completed this summer and the park will begin taking actions to protect the jazz resources of New Orleans and providing the visitor with a better understanding of the music.

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*John Paige and Mary McVeigh served on both the special resource study for New Orleans Jazz as well as the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park General Management Plan projects.*

Photos courtesy National Park Service/N. Kuykendell.