

New Orleans, 1960

In 1960, the American photographer **WILLIAM CLAXTON** and German writer **JOACHIM E. BERENDT** traveled across the U.S. to document the jazz scene. In New Orleans they found strip clubs, racial tensions, street parades—and some great music.

"YOU DON'T EVEN NEED TO BOTHER TO GO TO NEW ORLEANS. JAZZ in New Orleans is dead," they told us in New York. We heard the same thing again in Biloxi, Miss.—and Biloxi is barely 30 miles from New Orleans. But in New Orleans, in just nine days, we experienced two street parades, a funeral, a jazz picnic and six or seven jam sessions—all in the style of the grand old days when jazz was just beginning.

Even before you get to New Orleans, you can already tell from the roadside billboards that on Bourbon Street—the so-called "main street of jazz" in New Orleans—jazz is commercialized. We also passed a filling station, whose human filling station is divided into separate fountains for Negroes and for Whites. This is certainly not an unusual sight for any American who has ever been to the South. But the European who sees this kind of thing for the first time experiences a shock that, in this case, is only tinged with irony by the fact that the "black" and "white" water obviously come from the same pipe. There was also a puddle of water in front of the white water fountain. A little white boy who didn't want to get his feet dirty went to the water fountain for Negroes, but his father, horrified, tore him away: better to die of thirst

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than drink where a Negro has drunk before you!

The situation in New Orleans was similar; black and white musicians rarely play together, and so they don't notice that they draw their water from the same pipe.

WHILE NEW ORLEANS WAS A CAPITAL OF JAZZ, IT WAS DEFINITELY never a capital of the blues—the happy, jovial side of jazz stood front and center here. George Lewis' "Burgundy Street Blues," with its Creole atmosphere, has come to symbolize the blues in New Orleans. It is cer-





The Melvin Lastie Quintet on a patio in the French Quarter: Emile Verret (piano), Lawrence Guyton (bass), Melvin Lastie (cornet), Charles Otis (drums), Charles Fairley (tenor saxophone)

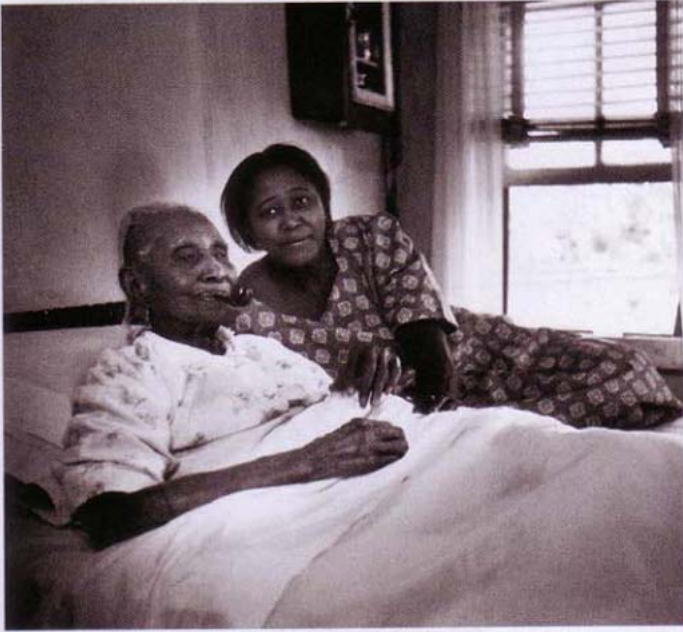
tainly one of the most beautiful blues recordings in the history of jazz, but as Dr. Ingolf Wachler has shown, it is "done up to look beautiful," without the desolate mood or the bleak realism that characterize genuine blues. In the "beautiful sadness" of "Burgundy Street Blues," one detects traces of the gorgeous city, with its elegant and fanciful wrought-iron decorations on the balconies, verandas and terraces, and the shady, peaceful patios in its backyards.

Lewis is the preminent representative of jazz in New Orleans today. And one can say

that there are really only three bands left in the world that play authentic New Orleans jazz at a truly high level, who draw upon their own tradition and experience instead of warming it over in some kind of revival or reconstructing it second or third hand from records. Those three bands are the George Lewis Band in New Orleans, the Wilbur De Paris "New" New Orleans Band in New York City and Kid Ory's Creole Jazz Band in San Francisco.

Lewis' detractors often say that he plays an alarming number of wrong notes. The miracle

of his music is that he does so and nonetheless communicates an atmosphere of a rarefied sensibility and a high degree of cultivation, which would normally seem incompatible with technical incompetence (while expressivity, vitality and sincerity are compatible with wrong notes). Few New Orleans musicians play music with as much sensitivity and sophistication as George Lewis. What baroque music is for John Lewis of the Modern Jazz Quartet, the old Creole culture and the French woodwind tradition are for George Lewis.



Above: Mrs. George Lewis comforts Mr. Lewis' 100-plus-year-old mother who is enjoying a smoke on her pipe

Above right: George Lewis in front of his home in Algiers, La.

Right: Paul Barbain in the French Quarter



This woodwind tradition, still highly regarded in the world of symphonic music today, entered the city through the orchestra of the famous French Opera of New Orleans. The French woodwind players were as important for jazz in New Orleans as the German brass players were for jazz in St. Louis. It is no accident that the best New Orleans clarinetists were Creoles—unlike the other Negroes, they were connected less to American culture and more to the French.

One constantly experiences in New Orleans—both inside and outside the jazz world—how vital and alive these old traditions remain even today. The 20th century, with all of its speed, could do little to weaken them. A young musician like Raymond Burke or, on a more commercial level, Pete Fountain, draws upon the old French woodwind tradition in every note of his clarinet improvisations. But a clarinetist from the early days—one of the most important of them all—was also still living in New Orleans at the time of our trip: Alphonse Picou (see table of contents photo on page 17).

As his name suggests, Alphonse was a Creole Negro. Born in 1878, he had played with the most diverse group of New Orleans bands since 1894, from the Olympia Band and Bunk Johnson at the turn of the century, to Papa Celestin at the century's midpoint. His famous solo in "High Society" is perhaps the most imitated solo in the history of jazz. Virtually every musician who plays "High Society" quotes it or uses parts of it. Alphonse



Picou owned a little bar on Ursulines Street where musicians often gathered. They told us not to arrive after 11 in the morning if we wanted to find him sober, but even that was obviously too late.

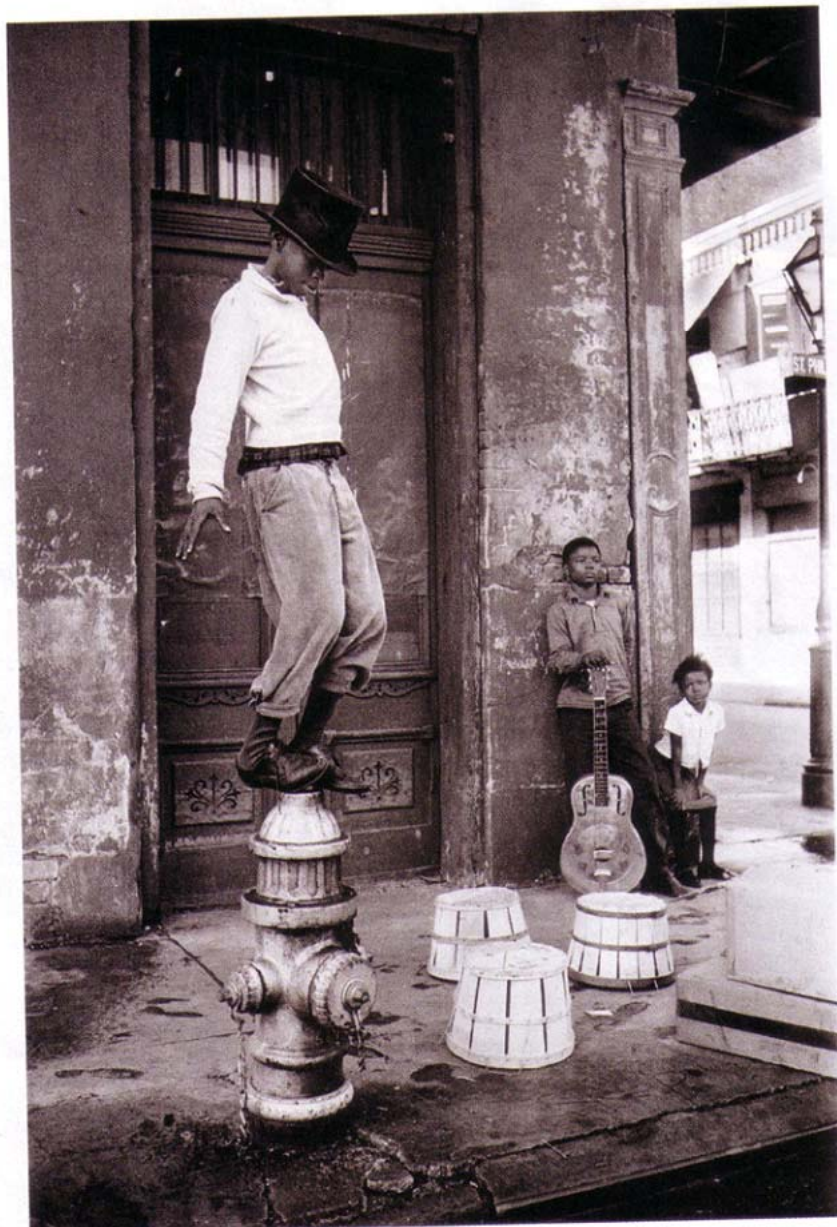
Alphonse Picou was happy that there were still people who remembered him. He took his clarinet, with its peculiar bell that looks like that of a saxophone ("It's much louder that way"), and danced around in his empty club. At first he produced only squeaks, but suddenly there were phrases from the "High Society" solo, crystal clear and flawless. Alphonse Picou died in February 1961 at the age of 82.

EVEN TODAY YOU STILL HAVE THE SENSE that, as in the early days, jazz in New Orleans is something like a family affair. When you don't run into the musicians, you run into their relatives. Despite all this, many people say jazz in New Orleans is dead because they think of Bourbon Street. Bourbon Street, in the old French Quarter, has long been regarded as the main street of jazz life in New Orleans. But when you get there you find very little jazz, and a solid half of what little is there is questionable.

On the other hand, there are that many more striptease shows. I counted 20 striptease clubs and five jazz clubs on Bourbon Street. The ratio is somewhat improved by the fact that, in many of the striptease clubs, second-rate jazz is played as background music as the girls undress. Even the menus of the famous clubs in New Orleans—perhaps the best restaurants in the United States—are geared to the striptease tourists. We got a "Striptease Steak," but a "Jazz Steak" was nowhere to be found.

The best jazz, relatively speaking, that we were able to find on Bourbon Street was at the Old Absinthe House, with Sweet Mama on piano and brothers Willie and Percy Humphrey on clarinet and trumpet, respectively. Sweet Mama pounds the piano without a trace of subtlety, as if it were a drum set with 88 keys, but the tourists don't come so much for the music as they do to see Sweet Mama. She wears bells on her scrawny feet that make a nice jingling sound when she taps them in time to the music. The tourists see the bells and say, "Ah yes, that's old New Orleans in all its beauty and authenticity." I was in the Old Absinthe House twice, and during that time five different tourists went up to Sweet Mama and asked her, "You know 'Tiger Rag'?" Each time, Sweet Mama made a face, turned to her musicians, and whispered something like "Oh, brother," but still, she played "Tiger Rag" every time.

Nevertheless, Bourbon Street is a very beautiful street, and in architectural terms, the old French Quarter is the most beautiful and most



Kids performing during a street parade



Paraders dance in the streets

stylistically harmonious "city" in the United States. The French wrought-iron grilles and Spanish patios; the Creole dolls in the shop windows; the excellent restaurants; the old Spanish and French houses; the streets, all of which still have French names; and the whole atmosphere of this *vieux carré* are unique and unmistakable. New Orleans is a consummate synthesis of Europe and America, or, more precisely, of French charm, Latin American passion, North American rationality and black vitality. In fact it is the only existing synthesis of these four elements, which have not come together to form a single whole anywhere else.

That is why, when you go to New Orleans you have the feeling that you're not in the United States anymore. The Americans say it's "like France." But if New Orleans were in France, you would think you had left France as soon as you set foot in the city. The North American contribution to the city's temperament and atmosphere is greater than most Americans would like to think.

The \$15 million the Americans paid Napoleon for the state of Louisiana in 1803 changes hands today in a single week for the city of New Orleans' oil bill. And 150 years ago, \$15 million was a greatly inflated purchase price—New Orleans, with its 8,000 inhabitants, was an insignificant little island in a giant swamp that threatened to swallow everything up again, sooner

or later. That swamp still surrounds the city today. For New Orleans does not lie "on the Gulf of Mexico," as even the Americans say it does; 170 kilometers of swampland stretch between the city and the mouth of the Mississippi River.

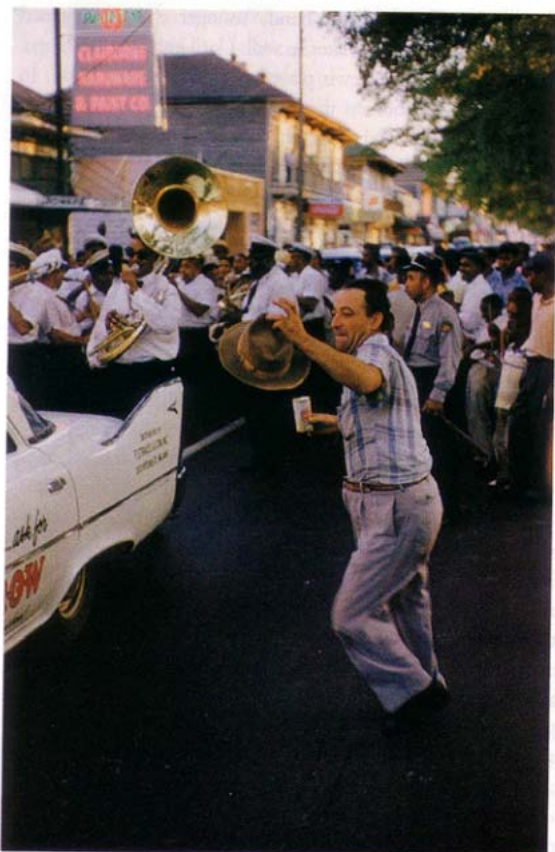
The French colonists who named Louisiana after Louis XIV in 1699 came not from the sea, but down the Mississippi River from Canada. New Orleans was originally supposed to be located where Biloxi is today. The instinct that led these settlers to found the city in a bend of the Mississippi between the river and big Lake Pontchartrain—in an act of deliberate disobedience to a directive from the Paris court—is still worthy of admiration 250 years later.

IN THE OLD NEW ORLEANS FUNERALS, SAD music is played on the way to the cemetery, and happy music played on the way home, with that much more swing and exuberance. In the street parades, brass bands march through the streets to celebrate everything under the sun. Both have become symbols of the atmosphere that enabled New Orleans to become the early capital of jazz, not only in musical but also in social terms.

The two New Orleans street parade bands that are richest in tradition still exist today: the Tuxedo Brass Band and the Eureka Brass Band. Both bands are effectively the same age as the century, and many of the famous early jazz musicians have played in them. Many famous names are still

present in them even today, including trumpeter Alvin Alcorn and drummer Louis Barbarin in the Tuxedo Brass Band. Younger musicians joined their ranks later, as well. Until just a few years ago, George Lewis played with the Eureka Band. In addition to these two old bands there is a third that can be heard in the street parades, the George Williams Brass Band. Paul Barbarin, a preferred drummer of Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton in the 1920s and 1930s, is simply *the* drummer in New Orleans today. You hear him and run into him everywhere.

The banners that were carried in our first street parade indicated that the Creole Fiesta Association, an organization that seeks to cultivate the old Creole culture and its traditions, organized it. Schools and Boy Scout troops, Boys and Girls clubs, even the military dispatched its delegations to the parade. In the military's delegation, blacks and whites marched peacefully side-by-side. Otherwise, only Negroes took part in the parade. The festive procession gathered near the intersection of North Claiborn and St. Bernard Avenues, and soon, after many groups in brilliantly colorful uniforms joined the contingent, it was 600- or 700-meters long. The police had to block off the entire neighborhood, and traffic was diverted. Everyone seemed to take part in the street parade. People were dancing everywhere: alone, in couples and in groups. Old people and children danced, too.



The most enthusiastic participants came marching and dancing immediately behind the band. They were the so-called "second line," which follows the "first line"—the musicians. One of the most popular accessories of the true "second liner" is an umbrella, although it almost never rains. You see umbrellas again and again, in every shape and color, at the street parades and, in general, everywhere that Negroes have fun. Umbrellas are the symbol of a little sky, under whose friendly canopy there is safety and security. Outside of this symbolic sky lies the hostile white world.

JAMES ALLEY, WHERE LOUIS ARMSTRONG WAS BORN, IS FAR AWAY FROM THE French Quarter in a poor and disreputable area between Perdido and Gravier Streets. Even Dr. Souchon, the great man of the New Orleans Jazz Club, warned us not to go there. The whole area looks like a landscape of ruins after a bombing raid, when the first makeshift huts have just been rebuilt. It is astonishing to learn that people have already been living in these huts for 70 or 80 years.

At first we only saw hostile, angry faces in James Alley. No one wanted to give us information. When we finally found Satchmo's birthplace—it is a narrow, shabby wooden hut at 723 James Alley—we heard very modern trumpet improvisations. Then the truly astonishing thing happened. In the very same room (if one can call it a room) where Louis Armstrong was born, a 14-year-old boy was practicing the trumpet. His name was Jerry McGhee. Naturally, we asked him about Louis Armstrong, but he didn't have the slightest interest in Old Satchmo. At one time he had heard that Armstrong was born in this room, but it meant no more to him than if Mr. Meier or Mr. Schulze had lived there. "I like Clifford Brown much better than him," Jerry said.

Later we met Jerry's mother. The young woman lives with her husband (a truck driver) and nine children in two small rooms. She said: "I'd like Jerry to play the guitar and not the trumpet. Then he can become the next Elvis Presley!" **JT**