

New Orleans Rhythm and Blues After Katrina

Music, Magic and Myth

Michael Urban



Pop Music, Culture and Identity

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Michael Urban

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New Orleans Rhythm and Blues After Katrina

Music, Magic and Myth

Michael Urban

University of California, Santa Cruz, USA

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For my girls: Veronica, Mili, Emily and Nancy

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1

Introduction

Apart from a small handful of people today whose activities during an earlier musical era had catapulted them into the status of international celebrities—say, Dr John, Fats Domino, Allen Toussaint or Irma Thomas—no one playing rhythm and blues (R&B) music in New Orleans these days entertains reasonable expectations about achieving fame and fortune by spearheading a revival of this music. Too many things have changed since the halcyon days of the city’s R&B explosion in the two decades following the Second World War—mass musical tastes, the appearance of multiple niche-music cultures, the demographics of the city itself—to seriously allow for the supposition that history is somehow poised to repeat itself. To be sure, there are R&B musicians in the Crescent City who have an international audience that they reach by touring, over the radio waves and with their recordings. Many of them appear in this book. But while they are able to pursue successful careers in music, that pursuit is most unlikely to result in stardom. Nonetheless, they remain “in that number”, performing the music first created by their legendary forebears, doing more than any other collection of individuals on the planet to keep alive a storied and profoundly influential musical tradition, introducing it to at least some members of a younger generation. This book is about them. Their story is told here primarily in their own words, words whose acumen, insight and poignancy have left me not a few times in awe and admiration.

What I have discovered in the course of researching this book is that the phrase just employed—a “collection of individuals”—is altogether inadequate to describe what I have encountered in the world of New Orleans musicians. Individuals, of course, there are; but the

striking thing would be how much each of them has absorbed and, in turn, reflects a sense of the community in which they reside. Every bit as much as one's street address, place of employment or the style of music that one performs, it is participation in this vibrant, affable and, at times, agreeably eccentric musical community that entitles one to be called a New Orleans musician. Conversations with members of this musical community altered my thinking about the subject of this book on more occasions than I can recall and left me—a person whose professional life has been spent mainly in the study of politics, a field fairly guaranteed to inculcate a skeptical, if not jaundiced, outlook on things—with an appreciation of how harmony can infuse human relations both on the bandstand and off. Indeed, this is the major theme running through these pages: the inter-penetration of the musical and the social. New Orleans rhythm and blues, like any music, has the capacity to generate community. The experience of standing together at some event while the national anthem is played would be an example of this; so would moving with others on the dance floor while the band supplies a groove to which people cannot but respond. But New Orleans R&B not only brings about community as an effect of its performance, it replicates community in its internal musical structure, arranging parts in a non-hierarchical manner requiring constant communication and mutual adjustments among the players. Moreover, audiences are involved in this interchange, taking their dance cues from the musicians and sending their own signals back to them in wordless dialogue.

I have chosen Hurricane Katrina as the starting point for this book because while there are numerous volumes on the history of New Orleans rhythm and blues, none has appeared to cover this topic in the years since the storm. But that choice of a starting point ineluctably entails the recognition that Katrina has also been a turning point. The storm and its aftermath have altered fundamentally and irreversibly the shape of that city, disgorging well over 100,000 of its former inhabitants—mainly poor and working-class African-Americans—and attracting tens of thousands of newcomers—who are mainly whites, usually in professional occupations and not uncommonly well-to-do. This transformation has severely eroded the traditional social base of rhythm and blues and at the same time has heightened awareness and appreciation of the music in other quarters of the city and beyond. My purpose in writing about New Orleans R&B in the current period requires a recognition of the scars left, and the opportunities opened, by Katrina.

My informants

This study has been informed by 56 interviews that I conducted in New Orleans between October and December 2013, and November and December 2014, with musicians and members of the city's musical infrastructure: music journalists, audio recording engineers, music foundation personnel, club owners and others. They, along with brief biographical notes, are all listed in the Appendix. The interviews were all tape-recorded and later transcribed. They lasted on average about an hour, during which time I put open-ended questions to my informants in order to minimize the risk of planting any of my ideas in their heads. Accordingly, I asked them about the music that they played, about what they regarded as distinctive about New Orleans rhythm and blues, about their musical inspirations and career highlights, and about Hurricane Katrina's—and her aftermath's—effects on them and on the music scene in the city. Once a conversation had begun, however, I turned to the technique of the "active interview" which seeks to elicit deeper levels of information from respondents by reducing the distance between interviewer and interviewee, turning the interview into a conversation, making it a collaborative project (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004). I would therefore sometimes respond to their remarks with probes for more information or with my own thoughts on the matter at hand. On some occasions, I would bring up what others had said on a topic introduced by my interlocutor, asking for his or her reaction to the thoughts of others. In all instances, the attempt has been to stimulate a dialogue that would have greater potential to unearth important information, qualifications and assessments than would monologic responses to set questions. The aim of this enterprise would be to produce "collective stories" from respondents, accounts of the world and their places in it that may diverge from commonsensical or authorized versions of reality (Miller and Glassner, 2004). When not identified explicitly in the text, the name of the person whose remarks I quote or refer to appears parenthetically in italics in order to distinguish comments made during interviews from parenthetical citations of published sources.

While drawing my sample, I had considerations of balance and variety in mind. *Balance*, in this context, would refer to both role and instrumentation. While it seemed appropriate to seek out especially those with the most responsibility for music making—band leaders and songwriters—I did not want to exclude the perspective of sidemen, and so included a number of them in the sample. The same consideration informed my thinking about instrumentation; I wanted all of

the instruments in a typical R&B band to be represented among my group of informants. With respect to *variety*, my intention was to talk with musicians who played various sorts of R&B. As discussed in detail below, the category “rhythm and blues” is itself an elastic one and it would not always be obvious that one or another version of it would *still* be rhythm and blues. This uncertainty is compounded by the fact that most of the musicians in the sample also play other styles of music. Therefore, I shall say a word here on the question of variety, using specific musicians to illustrate the various versions of R&B performed in New Orleans today.

At the onset, it seems clear that any discussion of this sort, no matter the music in question, is fraught with difficulties. On one hand, there is the problem of language to reckon with. How can natural language adequately translate into words the sounds that we hear in music? As John Blacking has put it, “musical discourse is essentially nonverbal . . . and to analyze nonverbal languages with verbal language runs the risk of destroying the evidence” (Blacking, 1995: 226). Language thus seems ever inadequate to the task of describing music. On the other hand, the reader interested in the music of one or another artist in my sample can turn to the Internet and listen to that music herself. It is altogether doubtful that my descriptions would add much, if anything, to a direct experience of the music itself. For these reasons, I generally refrain in what follows from offering descriptions, interpretations or analyses of the music performed by those whom I have interviewed for this study. In this section, however, I suspend that rule briefly for the purpose of introducing the notion of variety, the idea that New Orleans R&B is performed in various styles that often metastasize into other musics. Because contemporary R&B in New Orleans exists in both protean form as well as a preservationist mode, I use those orientations as poles creating a continuum along which my informants can be (imperfectly) placed. Placement, in turn, can illustrate variety.

The largest sub-group of informants consists of those carrying on the tradition of New Orleans R&B piano, a tradition established by artists such as Professor Longhair (Henry Roeland Byrd), Tuts Washington, Jack Dupree, Fats Domino, Huey “Piano” Smith, James Booker and a host of others. This is probably the closest one can get to the nub of the city’s classic rhythm and blues sound and feel. The exponents of this style in my sample—John Autin, Cindy Chen, Jon Cleary, Davell Crawford, CR Gruver, Davis Rogan and Ed Volker—tend to be band leaders and vocalists who also perform as solo acts. Most of them write much of their own material (Ed Volker’s compositions number in the thousands) in

addition to covering New Orleans R&B standards. I shall not attempt to say something about all of them here. Remaining within the limits of space and, more importantly, sticking to my objective of recounting the varieties of R&B played in New Orleans today would discourage such a digression. Instead, I shall focus on Jon Cleary's music, arguably rooted as firmly as any other of the members of this sub-group in the city's piano tradition, to illustrate this variety of R&B. Cleary, an Englishman who moved to the Crescent City at age 17 (Wissbaum, 2013), actually has done much to revive the popularity of this music, even while noting that one can only "play this style authentically [if] you live in New Orleans a long, long, long, long time" (quoted in Powell, 2013: 19). In performance, Cleary and his Absolute Monster Gentlemen mix classic R&B piano with back vocals drenched in gospel-inflected melisma and a cascade of second-line rhythms that move from one syncopated segment to the next, creating fresh musical moments one after another. Cleary's husky, soulful voice anchors the whole enterprise, even while his piano might drift off in other directions—say, an arabesque jazz solo or a light and lacy passage suggestive of a minuet—only to return more fervidly to the song's melody and rhythm, pounding out a plan- gent percussive accompaniment that drives the song home. Like others



Figure 1.1 Jon Cleary and the Absolute Monster Gentlemen perform at Chickie Wah Wah. Cleary on piano, Jeffrey “Jellybean” Alexander on drums, Cornell Williams on bass and Derwin “Big D.” Perkins on guitar

in this sub-group, his music places New Orleans-style piano, with its unmistakable, signature sound, at center stage.

A second group of musicians—including Clarence “Tadpole” Henry, Jimmy Horn, Luther Kent, Deacon John Moore and Rick Olivier—perform mainly or exclusively in the traditional or classical style of New Orleans R&B. Consequently, the same piano sound figures centrally in their music, even while these individuals are vocalists who in some cases also play guitar. The orientation is preservationist, although Deacon John Moore (Swenson, 2010) sometimes departs from that format for commercial purposes and Luther Kent occasionally dips into jazz. However, the most committed preservationists—whose bands are both composed of the instruments that one would encounter in a classic New Orleans R&B combo: rhythm and horn sections, piano and guitar—represent two distinct orientations toward traditional New Orleans rhythm and blues. Jimmy Horn’s group, King James and the Special Men, offers a low-down, bluesy version of the music, served up with an intense, emotional delivery. It features syncopated rhythms along with a sizeable dose of drive that often shades into a trance-inducing rhythmic feel. Rick Olivier’s band, the Creole String Beans, works the other side of Tradition Street, pumping out a light, bouncy sound that includes lesser known chestnuts from the 1950s and early 1960s as well as original compositions that are virtually indistinguishable from the songs that they cover.

Dana Abbott, who fronts an eponymous band, describes the sound that she is after as “some throwdown church”. Behind effectively the same instrumentation as the groups described in the preceding paragraph, she knocks out a variety of New Orleans R&B heavily tinged with elements of gospel and soul whose emotional intensity sometimes seems on the verge of spinning out of control. While working within a generally preservationist idiom, she also writes some of her own material which sometimes includes novel musical effects. Similarly, “Brother” Tyrone Pollard and the Mindbenders perform vintage soul-inspired R&B, some of it written by Pollard and the band’s guitar player, Everette Eglin (Barretta, 2013). “Brother” Tyrone describes his music as “something that you stir from the bottom”, connoting a sound that reaches the bottom of the soul, not unlike Abbott’s “throwdown church”.

Among those in the sample, George Porter Jr, John Gros and Marc Paradis lead bands that most heavily lean in the direction of funk. Although rooted in that rhythmic mix, however, each is distinguished from the others by certain embellishments laid over top the funk bottom. George Porter Jr and His Runnin’ Pardners add elements of soul and

jazz to the funk flavor, sweetened with sugary vocal harmonies. John Gros's Papa Grows Funk—which disbanded in 2013 after nearly two decades of music making—concentrated on the funk rhythm, employing instruments in a vertiginous search for yet more variations on it, Gros's relentless organ salvos driving forward the whole enterprise. Gros has since brought his keyboards to other musical line-ups, among them Raw Oyster Cult, which is composed of the old Radiators minus Ed Volker. He has also been pairing up with artists such as Theresa Andersson, whose fiddle and vocals take Gros's funk grooves in altogether new directions. Marc Paradis's Johnny Sketch and the Dirty Notes—a band containing classically trained musicians, Paradis among them—experiment with unorthodox musical structures and tonalities. These three players represent something of the outer edge—or, perhaps, a cutting edge—of contemporary New Orleans R&B.

Leaning in another direction, towards rock,¹ would be four New Orleans band leaders: Dave Ferrato and the Tchoupazine; Chris Mulé and the Perpetrators (and the Honey Island Swamp Band); and Mark Mullins and Craig Klein who head up Bonerama, a trombone-heavy combo, who also have recorded with, and have backed up, Ferrato's band in live performances. The relatively large role assigned to the guitar—and, in the case of Bonerama, guitar amplifiers and accessories used to modify and to distort the trombone sound—sets these performers and their respective bands apart from the more traditionally oriented musicians just discussed. Ferrato and Mulé also share a tendency toward the extravagant, assembling on occasion 11- and 12-piece bands performing complex but tightly coordinated compositions, most of which have been written by the band leaders.

Just as New Orleans R&B—broadcast over great distances in the 1950s and 1960s—had a seminal influence on the inception and development of Jamaican ska and, later, reggae, so Caribbean music has been an important ingredient in both the jazz and rhythm and blues issuing from New Orleans itself, providing those musics with what Jelly Roll Morton famously called their “Spanish tinge”. Two percussionists playing in the Caribbean style have been included in the sample because of the flavor that they add to musicians more conversant with R&B or blues: Alfred “Uganda” Roberts, a self-taught musician who had played congas behind Professor Longhair for many years and who currently performs with bluesman John Mooney, creatively adding that “tinge” to Mooney's Delta blues; and Michael Skinkus, who holds a master's degree in music from Tulane University and has extensively studied in Cuba those techniques and styles of the island's

drum masters. He brings that “tinge” to performances by Ed Volker and others.

Finally, there is a handful of individuals in my sample who play R&B eclectically or who perform an eclectic version of rhythm and blues, among them: Glen David Andrews, Sidney Anthony, Elise and Ryan De Sade Way, Andy J. Forest, Alex McMurray, Bill Malchow, Charmaine Neville and Marc Stone. The best representative of eclectically playing R&B in this group might be Charmaine Neville, whose repertoire includes gospel, country and western, classical music, jazz and, of course, rhythm and blues. As she puts it, all of these styles remain separate for her, “they don’t comingle”. At the other end, perhaps the best example of those performing an eclectic version of R&B in which a number of different musics *do* comingle would be Glenn David Andrews. He describes his music as “traditional New Orleans jazz mixed up with funk and with deep Southern gospel, and with a lot of R&B and old school soul”. Andrews figures among the city’s most dynamic performers, and unleashing his musical mixture on audiences during live performances can be little short of explosive. Typically, Andrews will let his six-piece band warm things up with a number or two before he appears, immediately descending into the audience where, *sans* microphone, his stentorian voice booms above the instruments on stage. His presence in the audience reduces, if not obliterates, any distance between himself and the crowd; they respond enthusiastically, shouting, dancing and singing along with him. But he’s far from through yet. His vocals sustain a deep vibrato exhorting the audience to entertain the thought of something beyond the here and now, openly beseeching them to leave this veil of tears and to commune with one another, leavening these somber entreaties with dashes of humor and mirth. A raptly attentive audience follows his climb to the stage where he will spray them with an infectious trombone solo or two before rejoining the crowd, by now quite worked up but not as much as they will be once he has repeated his stage-to-crowd-to-stage peregrination a few more times over the course of the evening.

Outline of the book

The following chapter takes aim at the heart of my subject—the city’s musical community. Here the discussion turns to the unsolicited remarks of my informants that portray—or, better, construct—a distinct category of people called New Orleans musicians. That category encompasses more than a mere geographical location or even musical style.

It also, and more importantly, represents those accepted into the city's musical community because they follow community norms and engage in its authorized practices. A palpable sense of pride attends the status of New Orleans musicians, a sense amplified by the prospect of ostracism when the proper norms and practices are not respected. My discussion of what it means to be a New Orleans musician, according to the remarks of the musicians themselves, is divided into two parts: the relevant characteristics of individuals; and the norms and practices claimed for the musical community as a whole.

With respect to individual characteristics, New Orleans musicians are said to be especially versatile, capable of playing many if not all of the styles of music associated with the city. This particular virtue draws its significance from the reticulated structure of the labor market: in order to make a living in a low-wage town, most musicians must secure as many jobs as possible. Thus, they sometimes play in as many as ten bands, their names appearing on even more lists of potential subs who might be called when regular members are unavailable for a given date. Functioning in this milieu requires the musician to be prepared to play, say, traditional jazz on one night, R&B on the next and jazz fusion on a third. Over time, informants claim that "everybody plays with everybody"; synchronically, "we're one big band". The frequent interaction among members of the community in performance thus engenders a tangible sense of community, a sense reinforced by the music that they make whose signature sound is collective improvisation in which players go off script together, setting off without compass on musical excursions, guided only by a sense of communication among themselves that indicates where each might fit into the whole.

My informants were unanimous in their descriptions of their community as being exceptionally tight-knit, based on mutual aid and a ready exchange of favors, amounting in many instances to a "family". Entrance into this community would be secured by the practice of "welcoming", whereby musicians new to the scene would be invited to sit in with established players, and reinforced by the newcomer's display of etiquette expressed by not playing to showcase one's virtuosity but to blend in with the other performers to enhance the group sound along the lines of collective improvisation. The de-focusing of musical individualism—traditionally a feature of New Orleans musicians—persists into the present and is reinforced consciously by awareness of that tradition itself. In that regard, today's New Orleans musician is likely to locate himself within the myth of the city's musical community, "honoring" the past, "bringing it up to date", experiencing "the