NEW ORLEANS, THE “CREOLE CONCEPT,” AND JAZZ

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Jazz was born in New Orleans, a city that had a rich and varied history and that, as most history books will have it, was a melting pot of cultures. Musicians in New Orleans took ingredients from all of these cultures and mixed them together, thus inventing a musical style that could not have been formed anywhere else. Jazz's birth, in this narrative, is firmly bound to the place and time and social environment of New Orleans in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century.

History, however, is more complex than that. While there are good arguments for a broader view that finds the foundations for jazz in rural areas of the South as well as in other cities such as, for example, Charleston, South Carolina, New Orleans did play a decisive role in the formation of the music. New Orleans offered a peculiar political and cultural climate which was built upon its diverse communities, made up from many different ethnicities—Spanish, French, all sorts of British (including Irish and Scottish), German, Mexican, Canadian (= Acadian or Cajun), Caribbean, African, indigenous or native American, and everything beyond and in between. The social relationship between these groups in New Orleans was more open than in many other places in the United States. The city had a long history of regular changes in its ruling parties, even the ruling countries, and their respective legal customs. New Orleans was a major harbor, an international trade hub (for goods as well as slaves), with connections to other federal states, to Latin American countries, to Africa and old Europe. It clearly drew a different kind of people than one would later see or meet in Chicago or in Kansas City. New Orleans was probably the most international city of its kind in the New World.

And everybody brought his or her own culture. Henry Arnold Kmen’s Music in New Orleans sets the picture. “The story of music in New Orleans” he begins his book, “must begin with dancing” (Kmen 1966, 3). Dancing, quite obviously, is one of the ingredients for the melting pot, a mutual form of entertainment that keeps memories of home alive and at the same time allows others in. One does not dance by oneself. One dances with a partner, and one rather dances with others who join the fun. Kmen pictures the balls that were held in the early 1800s, balls that were fun as well as social events, balls that marked class, influence, and power. Formal balls and public dance halls proved to be a class-transcending form of entertainment, although the splendor of the upper-class events clearly spilled down to the cheaper festivities. The dances were gavottes, cotillions, and waltzes as well as the English or the French quadrille. Soon these dances were taken up by the non-white population as well; so-called Quadroon Balls were frequented by free colored citizens but often also admitted slaves. And, of course, jazz history books are full of stories about Circus Square, better known as Congo Square, where the city government had approved
Sunday “negro dancing” under police supervision. In the early reports about the dancing in Congo Square, we see a similar response to the new forms of social entertainment as we would see later when jazz came to Europe in the 1920s. What most impressed the eyewitnesses was the dancing, slow or wild, leaps or circle dances, accompanied by percussive music beaten out on drums and banjos, with the lines of the lead singer followed by responsive chants from the crowd (one of many examples can be found in the travel reports of Christian Schultz; see Schultz 1810, 197).

There was opera and classical music in New Orleans in the nineteenth century as well (see Baron 2013). The city, after all, had the first opera house in the United States, and soon even two of them, and was proud of staging major works shortly after they had been premiered in Europe. The influence of opera on jazz is both direct and indirect. The orchestras brought many good musicians to the city who served as teachers to a number of later jazz players; the opera also provided a common vocabulary New Orleanians would be familiar with, not so much different from how in Italy arias could become a hit whistled by the working man on the street. Louis Armstrong is the best example for the influence of opera on jazz, not so much in a direct impact as in the dramatic conception of his solos, in his emphasis on melody, in his awareness for musical effects.

Dance, opera, African traditions . . . add to these the many ethnic music traditions brought along by citizens as well as visitors to the city. Add Scottish reels, Irish jigs, German choirs, and much more, and you get a picture of what actually goes into the melting pot with which jazz history books like to start their narrative.

Fast forward to the year 1994 and my own first personal visit to the Crescent City. It must have been in August or early September. It was a hot and humid day when I arrived. My friend Scott met me at the airport and took me into town. We wandered around the French Quarter, a drink in our hands, and I was emotionally shaken by the experience of finally being in the city I had read so much about, a city that was home to the music at the center of my life. In the evening we went home. Scott lived on Burgundy Street, a small backyard house that used to be the slave servants’ quarters to the main house. Two stories, balcony, a small garden with banana plants, fans turning in the tiny rooms to each side of the staircase. I remember falling asleep with an open window—as a European I was not accustomed to air conditioning—listening to the sounds that mingled in the night. And I remember waking up, sweaty from the subtropical heat, hearing the calliope from a Mississippi steam boat down by the river.

Wait . . . a calliope? How could I hear the calliope so clearly when it was a mile away? I recalled that famous legend about Buddy Bolden, whose cornet supposedly could be heard across Lake Pontchatrain. And then it struck me. My one-sided reading had understood the image of the melting pot as a social and cultural phenomenon, but I had completely left out the climatic component of this image. Sound travels differently in humidity than in dry air. A subtropical climate, houses with cooling courtyards, enormously well-carrying acoustics, and an ethnical mix of residents as was custom in the days—all of this in a time when you didn’t close your windows in the summer but opened them widely. . . . You hear songs, drums, the calliope, street musicians, or just the street noises over blocks of houses, mixed in a mush of sound that makes the melting pot tangible as an acoustic phenomenon.

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In her essay on the formation of Afro-Creole culture, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall runs down the different meanings of “creole” over the years in American history. She explains the origin in the Portuguese “crioulo,” meaning a slave of African descent born in the New World, its extension to include Europeans born there as well, and its meaning in the Spanish and French colonies where “creole” distinguished American-born from African-born slaves. She explains how “the Latin-American elite born in the Americas was called the creole elite and was accused of being incapable of self-rule in part because of its racially mixed heritage,” and how, “rejecting this
New Orleans, the “Creole Concept,” and Jazz

heritage, the creole elite of Latin America redefined the word creole to mean people of exclusively European descent born in the Americas” (Hall 1992, 60, my emphasis). This understanding was strengthened by writings such as George Washington Cable’s The Creoles of Louisiana (Cable 1884), endorsing an all-white definition of creole, although Cable in other essays opened up the understanding by referring to white purity being softened by real-world necessities (Tregle 1992, 175). The fact that many people of color were identified as “creoles” was for a while excused as a terminological error to be attributed to “the pre-Civil War association of members of this class with the true creole population, giving them identity as ‘creole negroes’ in much the same way that one refers to ‘creole tomatoes’ or ‘creole cattle’, signifying origin in Louisiana soil” (Tregle 1992, 133).

One might say that from the 1870s onward, the term “creole of color” was accepted “as a permissible designation for mixed-race offspring or descendants of legitimate creoles” (Tregle 133; see also Ostendorf 2013), and that for most Americans “creole” stood for an African American with light skin and possibly some “Caucasian” features. The term clearly had quite different undertones, referring either to race or class or social standing in a world that was on the lookout for a new national identity among the many ethnic groups that populated it and continued to arrive.

The “free black creoles” of the nineteenth century had a special status in New Orleans. They had “emerged from French and Spanish rule not only with unusual rights and powers but also with a peculiar assertiveness and self-confidence” (Logsden and Bell 1992, 204). Many of them were wealthy within their ethnic group and were skilled in “occupations normally closed to free persons of African ancestry in Anglo-America.” They felt superior to the slave population of the city, and they self-confidently felt that they had the right of equal citizenship in the United States. Over the years laws tried to get a grip on the changing racial relationship between whites, free people of color, slaves, and non-American whites. Black creoles “escaped much of the renewed severity by living within the virtually autonomous creole municipal districts of New Orleans that were created in 1836, where enforcement of almost all laws was notoriously lax.” As a result, “free and slave black creoles continued to gather for festivities, frequent bars and dance halls, and cohabit despite the state laws designed to constrain such activity” (Logsden and Bell 1992, 207).

Most of the black creoles in New Orleans saw themselves as French Creoles and had a specific pride in their French heritage and language, which both set them apart from mainstream America and in times of a changing social and racial situation gave them a very specific identity. The black creoles of New Orleans developed their own cultural traditions, ritualized events involving food, dance, and music. They also established their own system of aesthetic and social values, a system which ultimately was no less based on group affiliation than the general value system in the United States based on race and national origin.

Enter Music . . .

Then came the Civil War and Louisiana Legislative Code No. 111, which “designated that anyone of any African ancestry was Negro” (Buerkle and Barker 1973, 9). “The change was devastating for the Creole of Color,” explain Jack Buerkle and Danny Barker, as “it required the laborious task of creating a new self-image” (ibid.). By the 1890s, “the Creoles of New Orleans were being pushed out of their old trades and down on the social scale” (Lomax 1949, 79). “The Creoles of Color,” though “making their adjustment to new occupations, tried to capitalize on their educational background and training whenever possible” (Buerkle and Barker 1973, 10). A musical consequence of this development was that black and creole people of color were being denied access to subsidized music training, a fact which “must have been especially discouraging for the Creoles of Color, for where the dark Negro had not known formal instruction in music in earlier days, the Creoles had” (ibid., 63). As a consequence, “the Creoles of Color and the blacks (. . .)
developed their own means to continue (in the case of the Creoles), or to begin (in the case of the blacks) formal music instruction without depending upon the whites” (ibid., 63). It was during this time, then, that music, which for many of the creoles had mostly been a pastime, became a source of income. Creole musicians prided themselves in their musical knowledge and defended themselves against the non-creole black musicians who for the most part came from a common laborer or service worker background, possessed “no training in music whatsoever and succeeded in this field only because of their talent” (Lomax 1949, 80). “Music, which had been an avocation, became by necessity a vocation. The Creoles’ contact with the black man, which had been as minimal as possible (for there had been vast status differences), became much more extensive” (Buerkle and Barker 1973, 63).

Enter Jazz . . .

Let us look at some examples . . . Jelly Roll Morton, one of the most important musicians documenting early jazz life in New Orleans, called himself “New Orleans Creole and Inventor of Jazz.” Alan Lomax begins his collection of Morton’s accounts of his own life with a chapter titled “My Folks Were All Frenchmans,” in which the pianist and composer claims his French heritage, his ancestors having arrived in New Orleans long before the Louisiana Purchase. He had anglicized his name, Morton explains, from the French La Menthe because he did not want to be called “Frenchy.” Jelly Roll Morton’s younger sister, Frances M. Oliver, explains the tension and its consequences: “At one time,” she says, “some of the Creole people in downtown New Orleans believed in class and caste. But my brother wasn’t prejudiced against dark people” (Russell 1999, 91).

Similar to Morton’s case, the clarinetist Barney Bigard starts his autobiography with a chapter titled “All My People, They All Spoke French,” and then identifies his family’s ethnic background as “Creoles of color,’ which was essentially a mixture of Spanish and French” (Bigard 1985, 5). Even though Bigard does not differentiate anymore, he paints his teachers, all of them professional creoles, as highly skilled (classically trained, that is) clarinetists (ibid., 18).

Paul Dominguez, a creole New Orleans fiddler, explains “creole” to Alan Lomax: “A Creole,” he says, “is a mixture of Spanish and white and must talk French” (Lomax 1949, 83). Dominguez then differentiates between different wards, pointing out that the Seventh and Eighth Wards in New Orleans are predominantly creole, while in the Ninth Ward they might call themselves creole, “but they’re black and they got bad hair. They’re from the country” (ibid.).

The clarinetist Sidney Bechet takes another route and starts his autobiography by identifying his grandfather as a former slave, thus linking him and himself all the way back to Africa (Bechet 1960, 6). Bechet, of course, later moved to France and thus embraced the other side of his . . . well, call it his cultural heritage, as well. Bechet, who had come from a creole bourgeois family that still spoke French in the 1890s (Chilton 1987, 2), hardly differentiates between creole and black musicians. Creole, for him, is part of an overall black New Orleans with only the names different, not the music or the musical approach. At the same time, though, Bechet had learned his trade from descendants of a long line of creole clarinet players and teachers, among them George Baquet, Luis “Papa” Tio, and Luis Tio, Jr.

Leonard Bechet, on the other hand, a dentist, trombonist, and Sidney Bechet’s older brother, explains that during his childhood Creole musicians tried not to mix with black musicians. They considered themselves professional and the style of playing of the black uptown musicians as being too “rough.” He gives an example: “Louis [Armstrong] and them played that low-down type of music, when us Creole musicians always did hold up a nice prestige, you understand, demanded respect among the people, because we played nice music” (Lomax 1949, 96). The same rough, risk-taking approach that favored improvisation over planned musical structures was
highly popular, though, which made young musicians strive to learn both approaches, the more formal one as well as the one favoring hot playing, or, in the words of the older Bechet, “You had to play real hard when you play for Negroes” (ibid., 98).

Although the inner-ethnic differentiation according to skin color, African or Caucasian features, specific origin, name, language spoken, lineage of family, teachers, colleagues, and bands played with continued to be a decisive factor for getting work in the 1920s, when the jazz scene had moved up to Chicago, at one point the idea of “creole” had become mostly nostalgic, a memory of days when it was so much easier to differentiate between people, between musicians, between cultural concepts.

King Oliver’s ensemble, which made highly influential jazz recordings in 1923 featuring the young Louis Armstrong, called itself the “Creole Jazz Band,” riffing on a seven-piece ensemble that had toured the United States from 1914 to 1918, called the Creole Band or the Creole Orchestra. King Oliver hired some musicians who would qualify as “creole,” such as Honoré Dutrey, Johnny St. Cyr, and later Barney Bigard or Albert Nicholas, but most of his band members would be identified as New Orleans uptown blacks. The name was a label, and apart from some mocking remarks that some of the self-confident creole musicians on the scene would provide to put down their non-creole colleagues, nobody in the North knew or cared about the difference. Class differentiation in the North was designated through what W.E.B. Du Bois called the “talented tenth”: ministers, lawyers, doctors, and educators who “strove to exercise civic leadership for all blacks in the realms of culture, morals, religion, and politics” (Peretti 1992, 61). Some of the Northern blacks felt that the Southerners “brought discrimination with them” when they arrived and didn’t quite fit into the middle-class culture that had developed among blacks in the North (ibid.). The cultural segment of the talented tenth looked at white art music for guidance, instead of the rougher forms of music making, which was essentially seen as backward, rural, Southern, past. The writing about music during the Harlem Renaissance reflects this move to adapt black aesthetics to a European system of values instead of analyzing and embracing it as a merit in itself.

However, although the term “creole” became obsolete both as a stylistic and a class category in music, there is some element of the creole/black discourse in New Orleans that survived in jazz and became a decisive factor in this music to this day. Well aware of the different meanings of the term “creolization” (see Ostendorf 2013), I would opt for a different terminological solution for this phenomenon. I call it the “creole concept.”

The creole concept would be the realization of Creole musicians in New Orleans that, in order to continue their musical journey, they not only had to let others, in this case the uptown black musicians, into their world, but that this kind of merging was essential, basic for the music they were playing. The creole concept would be the realization of black musicians in New Orleans that in order to continue their musical journey they needed to keep developing their own voice as well as take the advice of others, of downtown creole “musicianers” (as Sidney Bechet would call the learned professionals). The creole concept would take into consideration the reality of a musical world where the sounds of French opera, German Chorvereine, all sort of British ditties, Caribbean melodies and rhythms, and the drums, banjos, and responsive chants of Congo Square had to mix because music not only preserves memory but also lives in the “now” and mirrors the present. The creole concept would not reinforce class differences but create community, based in this case on the cultural values of the music. The creole concept, then, would be the realization that in order to play this music, jazz, you need to accept many different things: the tradition of the music, the heritage of the community in which the music originated, the background of the musicians you play with, the expectation of your audience, your own personal musical background that inspires you and makes you want to play. The creole concept would be the element that makes jazz such a productive music, asking everyone playing it to respect its tradition—but also in respecting its tradition, everybody playing it should put his or her own story into the music and thus change
the same tradition. The creole concept would be a concept of pride and daring, of preserving and experimentation, an acknowledgment that human culture develops by people coming together, mixing their experiences, and constantly changing history.

The creole concept is jazz.

The creole concept, as I call it, would be different from a hybrid concept because “hybridity” just takes the facts and not the deliberate willing into consideration, the consciousness of incorporating different traditions, backgrounds, musical vocabulary, or musical strategies within specific strains of the genre family. One could use another, less loaded term and talk about the productivity of jazz, which asks every musician to add his own five cents to the music, and only then, only if he or she is aware of his or her personal position within the cultural relationship, will he or she be fully able to grasp the art form. The creole concept is a productive concept as it constantly changes the subject itself with every new addition, as it changes reality, as it changes the scope and the sound of the music with every new musician mastering the idiom. Some specific examples may help to explain this idea of what I call the creole concept in jazz history.

**Example 1: Duke Ellington**

In his autobiography, Duke Ellington talks about the first New Orleans musicians he had in his band, the bassist Wellman Braud and the clarinetist Barney Bigard. He loved Bigard’s “woody tone,” as he calls it, the way he put “the filigree work into an arrangement” that at times reminded him “of all that delicate wrought iron you see in his hometown” (Ellington 1973, 115). Where Bigard and Braud spoke of their proud creole heritage, Ellington was already developing his own kind of creole concept, a sound strategy for his band that emphasized the individual voice in a way never before used in jazz and hard to follow by other composers or arrangers. Ellington is well known for having selected members of his band for their individual sound more than anything else. Each of his trumpeters, trombonists, and saxophonists was instantly recognizable, even if they played within the section—a horror for any other bandleader, but bliss for Ellington and us. The magic of his concept is that his music sounds like Ellington, first of all, even though he has all of these highly individual voices, thus proving that the creole concept is not one of chance, live and let live, hybridity, but one of aesthetic curiosity that comes out of the conviction that any new but authentic ingredient will only add to the persuasiveness of the thing itself.

One can hear this aspect in Ellington’s music in many of his recordings; however, for the sake of focusing on one particular example, a composition from his “New Orleans Suite” from 1970 will do perfectly. The piece is called *Second Line*, and it starts with that woody clarinet sound mentioned above that Barney Bigard had introduced, played here by Russell Procope. What one should listen to, though, is the ensemble playing of the orchestra and how one can clearly hear each of the musicians within the instrumental sections; one hears these sections not so much like one voice but more as a moving sound in which it seems possible to identify all of the overtones—and whoever knows Ellington will actually be able to name them, identify the musicians in that section just by listening to the arranged parts.

**Example 2: Albert Mangelsdorff**

The creole concept becomes especially visible when musicians who are not originally from the United States take up the music. In each country, European jazz history went through a process of fascination, imitation, assimilation, and innovation. It’s in the last of these stages in which musicians grasped the very idea of jazz, which is that in order to play this music convincingly you not only had to learn the vocabulary and structural grammar but also had to be able to identify your own personal position within the music’s continuum. It was not enough to sound like an African
American artist whom you admired; you had to find your own voice that came from within you, informed by the musical socialization you had gone through yourself. And thus, when jazz spread all over the world, the music’s experiences during its own birth became most important. Its productivity, the creole concept, as I call it, is written into the DNA of jazz: take whatever will come from your heart and incorporate it into the ever-growing idiom of jazz.

Albert Mangelsdorff is a case in point. He started playing jazz right after the war, building his style on the model of musicians such as J. J. Johnson, establishing his status as one of the “best” European trombonists in modern jazz. However, a visit to the United States in 1958 changed his approach completely, because he realized that he would never be able to play anything comparable to Miles Davis or all of the other American musicians he heard there, simply because they could draw on such a long history of African American music that he loved but was not his own background. Mangelsdorff’s personal style as well as his band style changed after that. He looked into where he came from, protestant hymns, contemporary composition, and a kind of versatility on his instrument that reflected the German virtue of diligence.

His recording of *Ant Steps on an Elephant’s Toe* is a case in point. One of Mangelsdorff’s solo performances in which he employs a technique called multiphonics, this allows him to play polyphonic, chordal lines by playing one note and singing another, thus evoking overtones that fill up the chord. The example also shows that productivity in jazz is not a one-way street, that jazz is not, as the Smithsonian Institution for a long time wanted us to believe, “born in the USA, enjoyed worldwide”; instead, inventions such as Mangelsdorff’s stylistic addition to the improvisational vocabulary of his instrument became a reference point among trombonists in America, the birthplace of jazz, in a way not so much different from when habanera rhythms found their way into New Orleans street bands as an element of the Spanish tinge.

### Example 3: David Murray

The next example is the exact opposite of Mangelsdorff. In 1997 the tenor saxophonist David Murray recorded an album in Guadeloupe entitled *Creole*. For this album, he brought together American colleagues such as flutist James Newton, pianist D. D. Jackson, bassist Ray Drummond, and drummer Billy Hart as well as a group of Caribbean percussionists, vocalists, and the guitarist of Gérard Lockel. Before this, he had recorded the album *Do Deuk Revue*, which combined his saxophone sound with Senegalese griots and rappers. Murray’s understanding of “creole” is closer to the idea of Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic, a discovery of cultural links through music.

On the album *Creole*, one finds songs in French and Portuguese and a strong percussive rhythm section; however, Murray’s aesthetic dominates the music. Murray was born in Oakland, California, in 1955, became part of the New York post-free jazz loft scene of the 1970s, was a founding member of the World Saxophone Quartet, and has generally been considered a major voice of American jazz since the 1980s. Murray, who lives in Portugal today and is a presence on the European concert and festival scene, is a major link between the New York loft scene and the European avant-garde. Gérard Lockel, on the other hand, is a musician born in Guadeloupe who moved to France in the 1950s and then returned to his home country in 1969, where he is both known for his nationalist convictions and is credited with bringing the traditional Gwo-ka music up to date. Gwo-ka literally means “big drum” and is the name of a major Guadeloupean folk music traditionally performed during outdoor celebrations held on Friday or Saturday nights (Camal 2012, 170). It is music a bit reminiscent of what we read about the historic Congo Square, with drums building a foundation above which other percussion instruments embellish and interact with dancers, singers, and the audience.

The idea of Gwo-ka and how David Murray is involved in the traditional format can best be heard in the song “Savon de Toilette” on the album; however, “Guadeloupe Sunrise” and
“Guadeloupe After Dark,” both duets by Lockel and Murray, are perhaps most interesting as a meeting of equal souls, of two musicians who value the traditions they come from yet are curious enough to listen to what the other has to say.  

Example 4: Soweto Kinch

Soweto Kinch is a young British alto saxophonist and rapper, born in 1978 to British-Caribbean parents, who was turned on to jazz after meeting Wynton Marsalis, and who in the 2000s became a big name on the British jazz scene. Kinch has a conventional approach to his jazz sets, influenced just as much by Sonny Rollins as by classical music or his British colleague Courtney Pine. He often performs in a trio setting with bass and drums, playing virtuoso improvisations over an intense dynamic rhythm; at the same time he will sing his rap tunes or use all kinds of pop or other music references, confronting his diverse audiences, no matter where they come from, with both familiar and suspicious musical material. A case in point is his double album epic “The Legend of Mike Smith” from 2012 that tells the story of an aspiring rapper possessed by each of the seven deadly sins. Soweto Kinch and other musicians of his age (and in other countries as well) believe in jazz as an ever-evolving musical idiom, not a thing of the past but desperately in need of the present. If anything, this is the other side of the creole concept: it’s not just respect for other cultures touched by the music; it is not just the need to acknowledge one’s own musical background to be authentic; it is only by staying in touch with the present that a productive music such as jazz will keep evolving.

Finally: New Orleans Today

New Orleans lost its position as a musical capital around the time jazz became popular. Musicians from New Orleans migrated to where the entertainment industry had their factories, theaters, and recording studios: to Chicago, New York, California. Yet, while New Orleans was no longer at the center of the action, it did not lose its music. Already in the 1920s, the idea of New Orleans had become mostly nostalgic, a stereotype of “way back when.” Musicians continued to work in the Crescent City with its many restaurants, bars, and venues of all kinds, playing the music fitting the city’s cliché of “Let the Good Times Roll”: smooth, often danceable Dixieland music with a hint of the blues and Cajun. There was modern jazz as well. New Orleans had its share of swing orchestras and bebop bands, of modern jazz combos and free jazz sessions. However, these clearly were a minority within the local music scene; if you played anything more modern than classic New Orleans or commercial Dixieland you would probably soon leave the city and move elsewhere. What New Orleans always retained, though, was a strong feeling of community based on the fact that the city over the twentieth century was and remained one of the poorest in the nation, a fact especially visible in its black population. Outlets for this feeling of community were, as they always had been, the black church and music. The celebrations of New Orleans, from the traditional Mardi Gras to the cutting edge Southern Decadence, from old-time jazz funerals to loud and happy block parties—and remember Henry Kmen’s words, “The story of music in New Orleans must begin with dancing”—the celebrations of New Orleans were and are class-transcending events, building a feeling of community stronger than in most other American cities.

After Katrina, the need for communal unity became even stronger with the realization that neighborhood help was closer than the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Music served an important function in the healing process of the stricken city. Musicians and music lovers from all over the world partook in initiatives to help reconstruction of New Orleans and to support the return of its people in an effort to keep a place alive that for them had as much emotional importance as it did for me when I first arrived there in 1994.
New Orleans after 2005 was far from New Orleans in the mid-nineteenth century. The ethnic diversity had trickled down to three major groups: white, black, and Hispanic. The divisions which ethnic groups tried to establish within themselves by subdividing their ethnicity into even smaller fragments had made place for a clear class differentiation: rich vs. poor. And, of course—and unfortunately it seems more so than ever—racism is still a subject. Being on the poorest end of the United States economy, though, New Orleanians are pragmatic: if Washington does not help, if the government in Baton Rouge is not effective enough, we have to help ourselves. Centuries of community-building experiences help New Orleanians in this effort to live a decent life, re-build their city in a better way, remember their past identity, good and bad, and build a future based on the smallest social networks, a system they can trust in because it always worked: their communities.

To this day, New Orleans music has a special function within these communities. If you come across one of the young brass bands gathering on street corners, yes, they play for the tourists, but they play for their own sake as well. They play their own music of the twenty-first century, riffing on Louis Armstrong and the Eureka Brass Band just as much as on Miles Davis, James Brown, Michael Jackson, Madonna, Eminem, or Jay-Z. Their music won’t be at the avant-garde of today’s jazz, but you can be sure that out of their ranks will come some of the future jazz inventors, because they learn the creole concept from the bottom up: be part of a community, acknowledge the difference, listen into your own past, know what’s going on in the world, find your own voice, play your own thing.

Notes
2. Albert Mangelsdorff: Ant Steps on an Elephant’s Toe from LP “Solo Now” (MPS 0068.067), recorded 9/10 February 1976.
3. This had for many years been the annual slogan for Jazz Appreciation Month.
5. A discussion of the terms “creolization,” “Creole,” and “créolité” (but not what I call the “creole concept” in this essay) in reference to David Murray’s music, can be found in an essay by Jerome Camal (2012).
6. Soweto Kinch: Invidia from the CD “The Legend of Mike Smith” (Soweto Kinch Recordings SKP003D), recorded 11/12 April 2012.

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