Book Review

Roll With It: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans

Matt Sakakeeny
Durham: Duke University Press, 2013
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230 Pages

New Orleans Suite: Music and Culture in Transition

Lewis Watts and Eric Porter
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126 Pages

Reviewed by Brian Lefresne

The closing days of August 2005 left an indelible mark on the United States. Hurricane Katrina, in combination with the deregulatory and the market driven focus of neoliberal capitalism, exposed the precarious existence of the region and the inhabitants of the Coastal South. A byproduct of this event has been the proliferation of scholarly work focusing on the peoples and cultures of New Orleans in their responses to the storm, but also to their place within the national conversation surrounding race, class, and politics in the United States as well as in the black diaspora. Two recent texts that contribute to this dialogue are Matt Sakakeeny's *Roll With It: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans* and Lewis Watts and Eric Porter's *New Orleans Suite: Music and Culture in Transition*. Both of these works, thanks in part to the array of photographs and illustrations they contain, provide stunning insight into the day-to-day lives of the citizens of New Orleans, both before and after the storm.

Using an overarching theme of brass band as sonic identifier, Sakakeeny places the musicians, and how they interact with the macroeconomics and social forces of their city, at the fore. His contention is that the musical and embodied elements of New Orleans brass band performance give the musicians "voice." Sakakeeny's idea of voice is not limited solely to vocal projections, but also includes other displays of the musicians' identity and culture such as physical and social mobility within the city, and visual projections of race and class. Framing New Orleans brass band musicians as agents and actors of aural, oral, and visual voice highlights the multiplicity of individuals and cultural practices present within the city.

Interestingly, Sakakeeny uses the performance practice of his subject(s) to inform the structure of his prose. The improvisational flow of a New Orleans brass band seeps into the structure and narrative of the work. Sakakeeny's text, unlike other academic works, shifts to and from longer and shorter chapters and changes direction from academic prose to reflective moments on his own positionality and on his relationship to the individuals featured within the book. In many ways, the structure of *Roll With It* mirrors the spontaneous and improvisational flow of a New Orleans second line: moving to the music and flowing where the musicians take us.

Chapter one explores the physical and social mobility afforded to brass band musicians. Parading through the streets grants musicians physical access to public spaces that otherwise have been removed from their social existence, either because of unwritten or written social and legal strictures. Likewise, this act gives bands the opportunity to utter their "voice" on streets, through neighborhoods, and under the I-10 Claiborne underpass, and in doing so make these physical spaces their own. In addition to physical mobility, participation in a brass band allows members to gain some semblance of social mobility through financial or material gains, and also to obtain cultural capital. The acquisition of cultural capital makes it possible for brass band musicians to rise to the upper echelon both at the micro within their ensemble, but also at the macro of the larger community.

The second chapter concentrates on the effect of the cultural economy on the musicians and their art form. New Orleans has feverishly spent the past decade promoting and marketing live jazz as a unique part of the city unavailable anywhere else. A cultural economy built upon jazz is contingent on treating the music as a commodity. This approach, however, relies on the simultaneous exploitation and marginalization of musicians, which has been achieved through placing restrictions on performance times and venues, and economic policies that make it next to impossible for individuals to live in the communities where they work. Sakakeeny uses the New Orleans Jazz &

Heritage festival as a prime example of how the culture industry relies on these musicians to promote the city while at the same time ensuring and re-inscribing musical performers' economic outsider status by denying them adequate compensation or protection from market forces. In spite of this economic exploitation and social occlusion, the author does highlight a bright spot—Harrah's Casino, itself a glittering symbol of excess and debauchery, provides local musicians with a gig that offers a regular schedule and paycheck.

The penultimate chapter explores the battle over tradition and innovation within the New Orleans brass band scene. The larger narrative of the historicization of jazz has ensnared the performance practice of brass bands. The fallout from this discourse is that brass bands become trapped within a performance tradition that dictates repertoire, dress, and performance venues, which in turn combats present-day groups such as the Soul Rebels and Rebirth Brass Band who incorporate contemporaneous musical numbers, fashion, and new and non-traditional performance venues into their performance practice. The newer generations of brass bands are merely highlighting not only the tradition of innovation in jazz, but are drawing upon a "repertoire of musical, thematic, and aesthetic practices to align tradition with their experience" (117). Sakakeeny highlights that New Orleans brass band performance practice is evolving with a new generation. The generational divide is clearly demarcated between those of the pre-civil rights and those of the post-civil rights era, and what the performers are battling over is how to project their identity in a post-industrial neoliberal land and soundscape.

Detailing the effect of institutional racism and interpersonal violence upon the African American community of New Orleans, chapter four details how brass bands provide voice both to individuals and to the collective community in the wake of loss. For Sakakeeny, brass bands performing at wakes and funeral parades provide one of the most audible utterances of grieving and loss for a segment of the population often placed on the fringes of society. Despite the social and fiscal mobility brass band members attain, their members are not immune to racial prejudice and acts of inhumanity. Noting how the Hot 8 Brass Band dealt with the loss of one of their own, drummer Dinerral Shavers, Sakakeeny provides one of the more touching passages I have encountered in a scholarly text.

Sakakeeny includes a brief conclusion that touches upon his own relationship with the individuals that are the focus of his own work, but also his own role in the shaping of and critical reception of black expressive cultures. In the closing paragraphs, he argues that ethnographers and other academics need to "open up more possibilities for social justice" (185) within their work. While this is not the ultimate goal of his book, I feel all readers can take a moment to pause on this statement to reflect critically upon how our work as academics can engage with and counter the myriad social injustices facing the individuals and social groups that are the focus of our work.

Lewis Watts and Eric Porter's photo-essay collection, while similar in theme and content to Sakakeeny, takes a different approach in handling the work. The authors open with a clear statement that their collection is not a reflection about the past or an attempt to provide a definitive commentary on post-Katrina New Orleans, but rather an exploration of the different ways Afro-diasporic culture is in dialogue with the ever-changing environs of the city. While Watts and Porter acknowledge that the impetus for their book was the storm, they take great care in emphasizing that their interest lies in how New Orleans and its citizens fit into broader transcultural and historical narratives.

Porter reflects in the opening chapter on how to best approach the subject of music in New Orleans amidst the competing narratives at both the local and the national level. This tactic allows Porter to acknowledge and place his own positionality in relation to the subject. For Porter, the music of, and from, New Orleans complicates the narrative of American exceptionalism and in turn provides a point of challenge to narratives that dictate music should be consumed for its aesthetic properties and not in relation to, or free of, "the political and cultural noise surrounding the music" (8).

Using the 2006 New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Fest as a backdrop, chapter two examines the role the culture industry, and the Jazz Fest in particular, plays in shaping identity, and more specifically black identity in the city. The battle over culture after the storm not only reproduces the pre-existing hierarchy of culture within the dynamic space of the city, but, as Porter notes, also provides an outlet for the populace to critique and comment upon the place and value of culture within the rebuilding city. In this discussion, Porter brings to the fore that within the black community exists a heterogeneity of opinions and stances about what forms of black culture will be sanctified as authentic and have a place within the new urban landscape. In addition, Porter provides an ethnography of the festival, which in turn allows for the discussion of the shift of black bodies and culture from producing within to being consumed within a free-market economy.

Chapter three focuses on the place of one of the most indelibly linked cultural acts with the city—the jazz parade. Shifting attention away from the parade itself and centering on the Social Aide and Pleasure Clubs that help organize them, Porter shows how the processions and their organizers mobilize community to form coalitions better suited to

combat violence in the city, as opposed to the institutions and power structures of the carceral state. Dissecting the cultural history of New Orleans' jazz parade, Porter argues that the jazz parade in a post-Katrina context is an extension and elaboration of the work and mission of the civil rights era. Parades project power within spaces that occlude African Americans while at the same time challenging the codification and regulation of public space. Regulating black bodies in public space highlights one of the many dichotomies of post-storm Katrina. Black bodies are welcome in official events such as Jazz Fest or as menial labour within the tourist industry, but when visibly projected into the public commons they become transformed into something threatening or violent. In effect, this is the newfound purpose of these parades: a way to provide outlets in lieu of and to mediate acts of violence, but also as a medium to dispel preconceived notions of the black citizenry of the city.

The fourth chapter examines benefit compilation recordings and concerts after Katrina. These live and recorded cultural moments attempt to make explicit sonically the experience of Katrina victims, both within the immediate moment, but also within a wider historical narrative of black alienation and disenfranchisement. Along these same lines, these sonic moments provide a site of possibility for rebuilding in the present as well as reimagining potential futures. Drawing from these performances, Porter details how these artists use cultural currency and memory not only to provide commentary on the effects of the storm but also to provide deeper contextualization that Katrina was not an isolated incident, but rather a waypoint in a much broader and longer narrative of neglect and abuse towards underprivileged populations. The artists, through their construction of a musical metanarrative, highlight the importance and the place of jazz within the national record while at the same time showing the imaginative possibilities and the constant evolution of the art form and its practitioners.

The final chapter, "To Reinvent Life," evaluates the city in relation to the idea of diaspora. Porter astutely notes that New Orleans is not merely a terminus within the black Atlantic, but also a hub within previously existing and newly emergent diasporas of the Caribbean, Mexico, and Latin America. To argue for a definitive interpretation of the cultural landscape and commentary of the city would betray the dynamic and fluid processes that are diaspora and creolization. The social and cultural fabric of the city is much like jazz itself: forever integrating new politics and elaborating upon prevailing cultural modes to create new forms and realities.

Any worthy discussion of these two texts must acknowledge their visual component. Throughout both texts, the authors have incorporated images that complement their narrative. Interspersed in the pages of *Roll With It* are charcoal sketch drawings by Willie Birch. Capturing musicians in everyday moments and in performance, Birch's work provides a unique interpretation of brass band culture and complements Sakakeeny's non-formalistic prose and structure. Watts' photography, divided into four main sections—Foundations, Hurricane Katrina, Funerals and Second Lines, and Mardi Gras—documents the daily lives of the citizenry of New Orleans. While not an exclusive focus of these texts, cultural performers do appear with regular frequency within the selections.

Overall, *Roll With It* and *New Orleans Suite* provide critical assessment and reevaluation of the place of, and the relationship between, cultural workers and their output within a rapidly changing city. Forming their critical evaluations from the same pool of individuals, events, and critical sources, these texts show the diverse critical commentary one can draw from a public and intellectual commons. Primarily focused on the musical fabric of the city, Watts and Porter and Sakakeeny's works would also be of interest to scholars of urban geography, the culture industry, and late capitalism.