NEW ORLEANS

A few hundred miles and several musical styles downriver from Memphis, the great melting pot of New Orleans made its own unique contribution to the development of rock & roll. The Crescent City's distinct musical tradition was shaped by a long history of cultural crossbreeding and a by a spirit of easygoing fun that made for a natural leap into the popular market. Famous for being one of the birthplaces of Jazz, New Orleans also had a rich heritage of rhythm & blues styles nurtured by a civically-mandated wild streak and a flourishing club scene that provided an outlet for all types of music (not to mention behavior). While the Memphis rockabillies made a screaming break from their country & western roots to create their own brand of rock & roll, the New Orleans rockers simply kept playing the R&B they'd played for years and felt little need to rebel against their proud heritage. As Fats Domino put it, "What they call 'rock & roll' now is just rhythm & blues—I've been playing it for fifteen years in New Orleans."[i] By the time Domino crossed over to the pop charts in 1955, the French Quarter clubs had long been filled with hard-driving, big beat sounds that needed little altering to be called "rock & roll."

"<u>The Cradle of Jazz</u>"

The rich, varied cultural textures of New Orleans were shaped by centuries of intermingling among the American Indian, Spanish, French, British, African, Caribbean, Latin American and other peoples who settled in or, in the case of the slaves, were forced to settle in the bustling port city at the mouth of the Mississippi. In contrast to other parts of the South, where slaves came predominantly from Africa, many of the slaves that came to New Orleans were brought from the West Indies and Latin America. Along with the early Spanish influence, this Latin influence established a link to South American customs, such as the Mardi Gras celebrations, and to the rhythms and flavors of Latin music which figured prominently in New Orleans rhythm & blues.

Music has always been an integral part of New Orleans life—a perpetual soundtrack for a city that loves festivals, parades and any excuse for a party. The European tradition of marching parade bands became an essential ingredient in the festivities, especially at Mardi Gras time and in the city's famous funeral processions, where a solemn march to the burial ground was followed by a spirited romp back into town. The bands were important training grounds for future jazz musicians, and the parade band tradition established the lively beat and rhythmic orientation that characterizes all New Orleans music. (As the seminal New Orleans drummer Earl Palmer recalled, "you could always tell a New Orleans drummer the minute you heard him play his bass drum because he'd have that parade beat connotation."[ii])

By the end of the 19th century, marching bands made up of blacks and Creoles had equaled and surpassed the white bands in numbers and talent. Segregation laws passed in 1894 forced together the two previously distinct and antagonistic social classes of "uncultured" blacks and "Creoles of color" (people of mixed blood who had been trained in the European tradition and had enjoyed a privileged status). The interaction between the two groups wedded African-derived elements—the improvisatory melodic styles and syncopated rhythms of the black folk traditions—with the harmonies,

instrumentation and regular meters (the groupings of beats against which the syncopations made themselves felt) of European tradition. This blending of traditions was gradually felt in the parade band music: the drum beats and march melodies grew less rigid and more inventive and the march melodies were embellished with bent and "blue" notes and set against improvised countermelodies and syncopated "second lines."

In a nutshell, this mixture of European and African-American elements laid the groundwork for the creation of ragtime and jazz. The piano-based ragtime style evolved in the 1890's from the marches and the from the rhythms of popular dances. As its popularity grew, instrumental "orchestrated ragtime" developed out of the parade bands and, with a healthy dose of the blues thrown in, formed the basis for classic New Orleans jazz. The music thrived in the red-light district known as "Storyville," then spilled over into the legitimate clubs and illegitimate pleasure houses after the Storyville bordellos were officially closed in 1917. And if a club owner couldn't afford an entire band, a piano player would suffice to keep the spirits up and the dancers moving. The "barrelhouse" piano players mixed jazz, ragtime, blues and boogie over a dance beat powerful enough to bring the most broken-down piano back to life. Most of all, the music—like the city—was Fun. The bleak lyrics and desolate mood of the guitar blues from the surrounding rural regions had no place in the "Big Easy," where even funerals were cause for celebration.

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[i]Fats Domino quote from "Rock abd Roll: The Early Days" videotape (Archive Films, 1984).
[ii]Max Weinberg, "The Big Beat," (Chicago: Contemporary, 1984), p. 89.