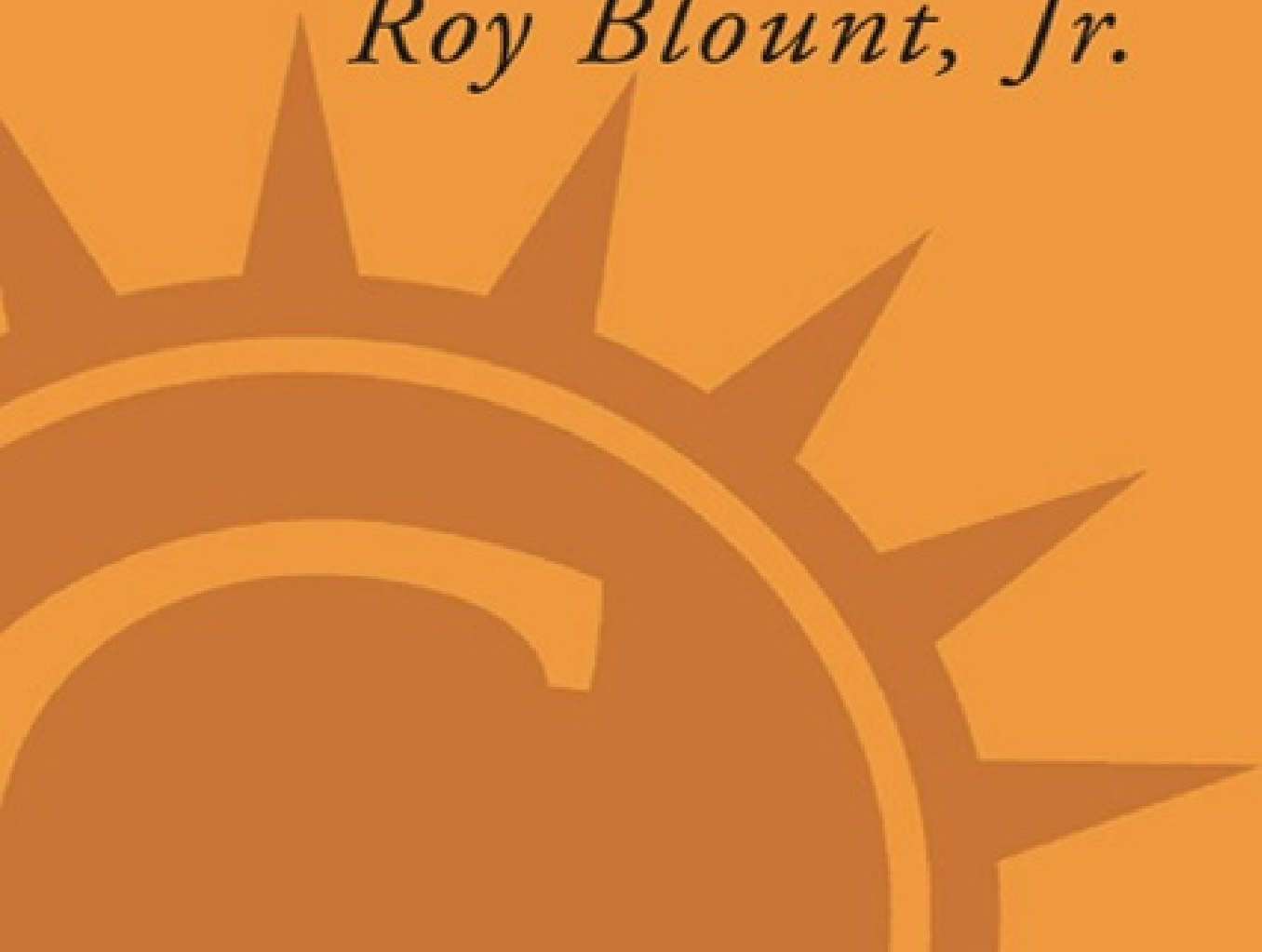


FEET ON THE STREET

Rambles Around New Orleans

Roy Blount, Jr.



Feet on the Street

RAMBLES AROUND NEW ORLEANS

Roy Blount Jr.



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For Joan, in New Orleans and all over

INTRODUCTION

. . . the low city . . . the labyrinthine mass of oleander and jasmine, lantana and mimosa . . .

—WILLIAM FAULKNER, *Absalom, Absalom!*

They say anything will grow here, and everything eats it.

—A LONG-TIME RESIDENT

THIS DOESN'T LOOK LIKE AN AMERICAN STREET. It's lined with architecture, some of it rotting, some of it in the dusty process of preservation; a variety of styles but largely late-eighteenth-century-to-mid-nineteenth-century Spanish-influence, because nearly all the original wooden French buildings burned in 1788 and 1794, while the city was under Spanish rule, and were replaced with stuccoed tiled-roof brick structures with lacy ironwork and—oh look, there's somebody out on one of the balconies now, smashing windows with a champagne bottle. "That's all right," explains a passing stranger who notes our concern, "it's her place. She's having some little problems with her family life." Chameleons skitter across turquoise stucco to disappear among elephant-ear leaves and bougainvillea blossoms, which Tennessee Williams likened to bloodshot eyes.

A sign says the street is a "Calle," which is Spanish. Back home what we're walking on would be the sidewalk, but here it's the banquette, an old Creole word, pronounced *bang-kit*, from the French for a raised walk around a parapet. The history is so thick around here you could pop it open with an oyster-knife, and oh, the aromarama: fresh-ground coffee, spilt beer, hot pastry, sloshed Tabasco, yesterday's fish, patchouli oil, and hints of some fortuitous compound . . . mule plop and olive salad?

We will not be starting off this day with alligator sausage, because the Tally Ho Café, on Chartres (pronounced Charters), has closed, having been run into by a car. So we have had a light, open-air breakfast of sugar-dusted beignets and a small chickory-flavored coffee at the Café du Monde on Decatur, while enjoying the day's rich harvest of obituaries in the daily *Times-Picayune*: only one due-to-gunshot-wound, which is unusual, but many great-named persons are mentioned, including the late Theoclecia Bijou Bourgeois, the late Glideville Creech, two different men named Dermis, a "Honey Bunny," a Charmyra, a J'John, and three different women given-named Marie Antoinette, one of whom married a Champagne. Providing musical accompaniment to breakfast was Jack the boombox man, standing in the street in red shorts and tube socks, playing the Beach Boys. Some days he plays gospel, some days jazz, whatever he has a mind to play. Once he was playing Sinatra reeealll slowww, and my friend

Rosemary James handed him some new batteries, which he took under advisement. Jack isn't selling anything, this is just how he chooses to spend his afternoon. He is a character.

Yes, afternoon. We are off to what might somewhere else be considered a late start, because last night after smoked softshell crab and grilled baby drum at Clancy's, on Annunciation, we did some dancing to the ReBirth Brass Band at the Maple Leaf club uptown, where the crowd sweated and swole and spilled out onto the street, and from there we went to the Saturn Bar over on St. Claude, whose beyond-grungy décor incorporates a Greek frieze, lots of red and white and yellow neon chandeliers, a psychedelic painting of a dragon, several pairs of panties, and a bumper sticker that says I'D RATHER BE AT THE OPERA. That must have been where we listened to a man with a crucifix hand-painted on his hat tell us about his father, who accumulated lots of cars in his yard and every Saturday would take his one battery around to each car and crank it. Because it was later, while we were having that nightcap at the Napoleon House, which is over two hundred years old, that the young couple in evening wear came in, looking pale, and swore that they had just seen the ghost of a beautiful naked quadron lady humming a melody that they could not for the life of them recall.

And now, cutting through the clip-clop of the mules drawing carriages over the cobblestones, we hear:

Betcha I can tell ya

Where ya

Got them shoooes.

African-American lad about nine years old. Doing a *lickety-clackety* shuffle on flattened halves of Fresca cans affixed to his sneaker soles.

“Don't want to take advantage of you, young man. How could you possibly know ___”

Betchadollar,

Betchadollar,

Where ya

Got them shoooes.

“Well, all right . . .” We show our dollar, and the lad, *clickle-lickity clack*, delivers:

Got your shoes on your feet,

Got your feet on the street,

And the street’s in Noo

Awlins, Loo-

Eez-ee-anna.

Where I, for my part, first ate a live oyster, and first saw a naked woman with the lights on. I was startled by both, they both by me—presumably in the first case, regrettably in the second. Where I first heard the blues, first met an eminent author, or any other kind of author, and first realized that a person of my own gender could have designs (when I was much younger) on my, uh, body. Every time I go to New Orleans I am startled by something.

NEW ORLEANS IS nobody’s oyster. It is situated, however, like a served-up oyster—the half-shell being the levees that keep Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River from engulfing the city. New Orleans lies several feet below river and lake level, and it sinks a little farther every year. When the big hurricane hits—and it will, New Orleanians assure you, with what suffices locally for civic pride—the waters will finally rise over the shell and inundate the town, killing tens of thousands.

Here is one thing you hear, locally, about the flood: “It hasn’t happened yet. That proves that we’re blessed.”

Here is another: “I hope it won’t, but if it does I’d hate to miss it.”

And another: “The other morning, I woke up thinking it happened last night.”

Many New Orleanians, in what suffices locally for prudence, have taken the precaution, officially urged by what suffices locally for civil authority, of keeping an ax in the attic. So they can chop a hole up through the roof, when the time comes, and rise above the flood.

There will be rooftop parties. Neither pestilence nor fire nor corruption nor rioting nor thuggery nor a series of governing powers—French then Spanish then French again then American then Confederate then American again—has managed to dampen New Orleanian spirits for long, so why should the Deluge?

“One day it’s coming,” I heard that expert say on the news, and when it does, “it’s very probable that the French Quarter becomes one massive tomb.”

But then New Orleanians don't get down in the mouth about death. Marching to a jazz funeral, a New Orleans band plays something slow and dirgey, but marching away it's upbeat: "Oh, Didn't He Ramble," a celebration of all that the deceased managed to get away with in his or her time.

New Orleans is my favorite place in the world to ramble. Even on those deep-summer days that make a person feel swathed in slowly melting hamfat, New Orleans has always put a spring in my step. Trying to do New Orleans justice, however, makes me feel like Audra MacDonald's child.

I mention Audra MacDonald not because she has anything to do with New Orleans music—her blues is too classical—but because of what I heard her say once in Carnegie Hall between songs: "My baby hates my voice. As soon as I start singing to her, she bursts into tears." Well, put yourself in that baby's place. Out comes that rich histrionic lyric soprano and the child thinks, "Oh, Lord, couldn't you just be a regular mama? I'm not that great a baby!"

I can hear residents already: "He thinks he can write about N'woilins and never had a Nectar Cream with Cream [a sort of snow-cone] over by Hansen's or the cannibal salad—raw beef in it—at the Magnolia Grill? He thinks he can write about N'wawlin and never saw the Irish throwing cabbages from their St. Patrick's parade and the un-Irish picking them up to take home for supper? He thinks he can write about Noowawlins and can't even figure out how to spell how it's pronounced right?" (The pronunciation *Noo Orleens* is just for song lyrics, rhyming as it does with *beans*, *means*, *queens*, and *scenes*.)

Residents do as residents will—they get into a particular Mardi Gras ball, a particular neighborhood, a particular bar, they develop little crotchets like claiming (oh, sure!) not to like beignets. They know what it means to miss the point of New Orleans. But here's something that New Orleanians tend to have in common: none of them believes that most of the others of them get New Orleans either. New Orleanian solidarity is a matter of *e pluribus falsibus unum*: from the erroneous many, one. Unless you have some kind of fetish about everybody pulling together, there is much to be said for this approach to truth.

Then too we could put it nicer. We could quote from the legendary New Orleans musical figure Allen Toussaint. Toussaint's many achievements include writing "Workin' in the Coal Mine" with another legendary New Orleans musical figure, Lee Dorsey. In a radio interview with Harry Shearer, who is a part-time New Orleans resident, Toussaint said this about Dorsey:

"Lee was a body and fender man, you know, and a good one. When we were recording, there'd be his little glass of Chivas Regal with some of his grease on it. And a good dresser, when it was time to do that. Listening to Lee Dorsey you can see a smile. You could tell that he was very glad at all times to be at the moment where he was."

Toussaint said this about the great New Orleans funk band, the Meters: “From my own anatomy and ear and spinebone, the Meters were the most perfect group. The way the sparks were flying: that kind of syncopation that seems to be going in all directions, but there’s a unity there.”

Tourists may not catch this—those tourists who walk the tawdriest blocks of Bourbon Street, who see other tourists weaving along holding drinks known as hurricanes or flashing their breasts for trinkets, who eat in the wrong famous restaurants, and who go back home saying big deal like we never saw drunks or breasts or got overcharged before. They should have walked farther.

It is the person in between—me, the visitor who keeps coming back—who can give you some perspective. For one thing, if you happen to catch breasts-for-trinkets just right, it can be a breath of fresh air. (She flips up her top and out they pop, tender gamboling lambs, and she’s flushed and she is cheered and gimcracks are thrown to her from a balcony and she and her friend go rambling off up the street to someplace where they can go over every inch of each other because they want to, bless their hearts. Though you can’t help doubting that he’s good enough for her.) Fresh air in New Orleans is like that kitten in *The Third Man*, the kitten who finds Harry Lime in the doorway, a great movie reveal mentioned by Walker Percy in *The Moviegoer*. It’s fleeting, it’s got to be a hardy damn kitten to be surviving in post-World War II Vienna, and it registers.

New Orleans is not what it once was, neither the fetid swamp nor the great city nor the readily affordable bohemia. Miami is now a more international town, Vegas more of a flesh-and-gambling mecca, and Memphis, thanks to FedEx, more of a hub. And if you know of a readily affordable bohemia in the United States today, I wish you’d tell me where. But New Orleans is still itself enough to erase any doubt that it *was* all the things it has been; it hasn’t lost the feel. It’s like no other place in America, and yet (or therefore) it’s the cradle of American culture.

It’s where Walt Whitman (he said) first tasted sin, where Abraham Lincoln got his first full sense of the scope and the primary shame of the nation, where Mark Twain began and ended his riverboat career and started imagining the books he would write, where Buddy Bolden and Bunk Johnson and Jelly Roll Morton became the first legends of jazz and Louis Armstrong put the “A” in American music, where W. C. Handy dreaded seeing that evening sun go down, where William Faulkner turned from poetry to fiction (and shot BBs at nuns from his garret window), where Huey Long went to law school, and where Tennessee Williams acquired his “Tennessee” and lost (he said) his virginity.

It’s also where John James Audubon drew the whooping crane (working from a dead one brought by a hunter who shot it as it speared baby alligators with its beak) and put in several sessions painting a mysterious high-born lady naked, after she approached him in the street, wearing a veil, and asked him to meet her at a certain address.

Where Zora Neale Hurston got into voodoo, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *This Side of Paradise*, O. Henry took his pen name and refuge from the law, and Langston Hughes bought some Wishing Powder and “the next day, quite unexpectedly, I found myself on the way to Havana.”

Where Kate Chopin smoked her first cigarette, Little Richard recorded “Good Golly, Miss Molly,” the Boswell Sisters got their act together, Chuck Berry was inspired to write “Johnny B. Goode,” Anita Loos wrote *Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend*, Ingrid Bergman (playing a trollop) ate jambalaya off the head of a dwarf, and a couple of guys tried to mug Richard Ford right out in front of his Garden District house but he didn’t have any money on him so they got back in their car and drove away. Walker Percy and Robert Stone set their first novels here, in the sixties, Percy’s lyrical-stoic, Stone’s politico-phantasmagoric.

New Orleans is where Louis Prima, Lillian Hellman, Dorothy Lamour, Mahalia Jackson, George Herriman (creator of Krazy Kat), Doctor John, Madame X (portrayed scandalously off-the-shoulder in Paris by John Singer Sargent), Richard Simmons, Lloyd Price, Truman Capote, Elmore Leonard, and Lee Harvey Oswald were born, and where Randy Newman spent what he referred to in song as “my baby years.” Where Walker Evans fell in love with the woman whom he would eventually marry but would first disappoint by leaving town when her husband brandished a gun at him. Where John Steinbeck and Hank Williams married their second wives (Hank, in response to popular demand, did it twice, on the same day, 3:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m., in Municipal Auditorium, price of admission from \$1.00 to \$2.80). Where Jefferson Davis, in town for a visit, died. Where Gram Parsons and both Marie Laveaus are buried, and where Anne Rice, in a red wedding dress, popped up out of a closed coffin delivered by a horse-drawn hearse for a book-signing session.

In New Orleans, craps, café au lait, and the cocktail were invented, and the following were introduced to America: cocaine, tomato sauce, the free lunch, Marquis of Queensbury boxing, the term *arriviste*, and the Mafia. A New Orleanian’s invention made sugar a common household item. The largest slave market in North America was here, and the first synagogue outside the original thirteen colonies. New Orleans was the first American city to build an opera house and the last to install a sewer system. It has been the most nearly European American city and the most nearly African. The northernmost Caribbean city and the westernmost Mediterranean. I know of two places where the *Marseillaise* was sung in defiance of an occupying power: Casablanca, in the movie, and New Orleans, under Union control.

I am not a New Orleans expert. If I’d lived here long enough to be that, I’d be dead, because New Orleans never closes. But then New Orleans has not generally been a place where creatives (see *lagniappe*, below), Fats Domino excepted, put down roots. It has been a place for reorientational interludes. Thomas Wolfe was here just long enough to muster the independence (or to intensify the paranoia) it took to sever his umbilical editorial connection to Maxwell Perkins. William Burroughs long enough, among “lamsters of every description,” to get busted for possession and flee the