Why the Good Times Still Roll

A divided state finds common ground in the relentless pursuit of pleasure

By THOMAS SANCTON NEW ORLEANS

Louisianians are not interested in ideologies or principles but in the fundamentals—the whirl of slot machines, the pounding of horses' hoofs, and the clink of ice in a Sazerac cocktail.
—Historian T. Harry Williams, 1960

Danny Barker knows all about the fundamentals. At 82, the jazz banjoist and guitarist has seen a lot of changes in his hometown since he went north, played with Louis Armstrong and toured with the Cab Calloway orchestra. But the fundamentals don't budge. “New Orleans people are unique,” he says, sitting in his shirt-sleeves on the front porch of his white shotgun house. “Somebody goin' to jail? Give him a party. Somebody died? Give him a party. They'd throw a party for a dog's birthday. Here you have a million people raised with a habit to celebrate.”

Some 120 miles away in the city of Lafayette, several thousand Cajuns are indulging the same habit at the Festival de Musique Acadienne. Clad in T-shirts, blue jeans and calico dresses, a throng of two-stepping dancers is raising a fine cloud of dust under moss-bearded branches. On the stage, silhouetted against a red sunset, Johnny Sonnier's Cajun Heritage lays down a pulsating chank-chank rhythm punctuated by accordion counterpoints, soaring fiddles and a piercing nasal vocal: "Jolie fille, jolie fille..."

Jean Richard, 79, a retired watchmaker from nearby Rayne ("Frog Capital of the World"), recalls an earlier time, when almost everybody in southwest Louisiana played an instrument. "My daddy could play harmonica, crow like a rooster and bark like a dog all at the same time." He shakes his head sadly. "That trait is gone today—nobody practices that anymore."

Backstage, the legendary Cajun fiddler Dewey Balfa, 65, waits his turn to go on, red plastic crawfish dangling from the neck of his violin. He speaks of the "great migration"—the expulsion of the French Acadians from Canada in 1755—as if it happened yesterday. "What they brought here is still alive in our culture and our love for each other," he says. "I'm an American, but I don't want to lose my French identity."

The Cajuns are as different from New Orleanians as New Orleanians are from Protestants in the rural north. Yet all Louisianians share something that sets them apart—at least in their own minds—from other Americans. They are bound, in the words of Bill Lynch, a former newspaperman who now serves as the state's inspector general, "by our unforgiving history." It is a paradoxical chronicle of political corruption and rougishness, of fabulous oil wealth and red-clay poverty, of exile and immigration, cultural blending and racial divides.

The state's citizens—black and white, Creole and Cajun—also share an amazing dedication to the pursuit of good times. It is a tradition that goes back to the state's original patron, Philippe, Duke of Orleans, the notorious carouser, drinker and lib-erine who ruled France as regent from 1715 to 1723 and gave his name to Louisiana's major city. For the duke, writes a French historian, "pleasure was the goal and festivity the means of expression."

Louisiana pleasures range from the simple to the sophisticated: food, music, gambling and sex top the list in the Latin-Catholic south; hunting, fishing and sex (remember Jimmy Swaggart?) tend to predominate in the Protestant north. Former Governor Earl K. Long managed to touch most of those bases: he loved nothing better than boar hunting and horse racing, and he ended his life in a steamy affair with a New Orleans stripper named Blaze Starr. Ex-Governor Edwin Edwards, who revels in his image as a womanizer and gambler, once boasted that the only thing that could lose him an election was being caught in bed "with a dead girl or a live boy." One Governor who definitely did not embody the state's hog-stomping, hell-raising ethos was Buddy Roemer, with all his dour talk of austerity, responsibility and honor—which goes a long way toward explaining why the voters just threw him out.

The epicenter of hedonism is New Orleans—and, just for the record, no one from there ever called the place the Big Easy or pronounced its name "Naw-lins." The late 19th century writer Lafcadio Hearn romanticized about the city's sensuality—"her nights of magical moonlight, and her days of dreamy languors and perfumes." He was even moved to compare its delicious decadence to "a dead bride crowned with orange flowers—a dead face that asked for a kiss." Actually, the place is a lot livelier than that. It is a seething agglomeration of jazz halls, Zydeco joints, R-amp-B clubs, great restaurants, all-night bars—and, of course, Mardi Gras. Where else would a city's business and social leaders don sequined costumes, ostrich plumes, masks and fake beards, and climb atop 20-ft-high floats and throw trinkets to the masses?

Nor has a decade-long recession done much to puncture the pleasure principle. "Part of our laissez-faire attitude," says attorney George Denegre, chairman of the region's Chamber of Commerce and a former King of Carnival, "is that, if times get tough, you go to the Gulf Coast instead of Paris." Ella Brennan, whose family owns several of the city's top restaurants, agrees. "This is a restaurant town," she says, sipping Chablis at the mahogany bar of Commander's Palace. "In New Orleans, if you're about to declare bankruptcy, you go out to dinner the night before."

That kind of response to adversity—one last hoot before it all hits the fan—is the town's most endearing quality. "If you fall ill on the streets of New York, people grumble about having to step over you or around you," wrote Walker Percy in a cynical moment. "In New Orleans there is still a chance, diminishing perhaps, that somebody will drag you into the neighborhood bar and pay the innkeeper for a shot of Early Times." Now faced with choosing between a twice-indicted rascal and an ex-Nazi Klan leader for Governor, the citizens of Louisiana could use a shot or two.