Living with music: departures and returns among early New Orleans jazz musicians

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For some time now, I have been exploring some of the ways in which metaphors of origins figure in our historical understanding of early jazz and connecting those metaphors to experiments in writing about the past and our experiences of the music. Alan Lomax has been one of my models here. His attempt in *Mister Jelly Roll* (2001) to find a new way of tracing out the meaning of someone's musical life has a great deal to teach us about how we write our histories, but also which histories of jazz we go on to write. A further inspiration for this work is Steven Feld's *Jazz Cosmopolitanism* (2012), which poetically refigures the relationship between past and present through a series of intimate textual, sonic and spoken exchanges over five years with Ghanaian jazz musicians and their everyday musical imaginings. Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (1984), that follows the mythic life of Buddy Bolden, makes available yet another set of creative possibilities for rethinking our approach to those early musicians and the narratives we rely on to make sense of their lives. But you can only advocate for so long before it is clearly necessary to say something about what this might look like in your own work.

The first part of this paper follows Lomax's example in mobilising a range of texts to find ways of registering the ordinary experiences among early New Orleans musicians of leaving the city in search of new opportunities and returning home, sometimes permanently, sometimes only briefly. The narrative moves between different times, places, and particular journeys, featuring a range of voices: some local, some not; some well-known, while others have been forgotten. It is primarily a mediation on the themes of home and homelessness, but also stasis and movement, and their significance for these artists and their audiences. Edward Casey begins his landmark study of place with the problem of being lost at sea, as the archetypal metaphor for the modern human condition (Casey, 2009:3). We are so lost in abstract time and space, he argues, that we are displaced from place itself. What I want to suggest is that understanding more about these themes as they have played out within the lives of early jazz musicians can reveal a lot about why their music continues to speak to us as it does. The second part is more personal; a way of accounting on another level for the movement of the first. It is a way of doing something different with the past in its relation to the present that suggests why things are the way they are, but without limiting what this might mean in terms of what we think and feel about them. The third part returns us to the issue of narrating the music's origins. Throughout, no single perspective takes precedence, no discrete moment is primary, and no one description is definitive. I juxtapose different modes and moods and moments of expression – the autobiographical, the poetic, the anecdotal, the vernacular, the investigative and the historical – in an attempt to convey just how this group of musicians came to understand and experience what leaving New Orleans meant to them; but equally, what the city has come to mean to us, thinking and talking and writing about it now, as both locals and strangers.

Each of the sections or scenes offers a perspective on the process by which the playing of and listening to jazz became a common, ordinary, shared aesthetic experience, implicated in and bound up with the everyday life of its practitioners and audiences. Not only was this process taking place in theatres, bars, clubs and tent shows in New Orleans and the surrounding regions, but it was also happening in the streets

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and people's homes, as well as on the radio, in the movies and on television, depending on where someone was and who they were with. The use of dates and places, specific to a lesser or greater degree, allows me to say something about how things might have looked and felt at those moments, however they were imagined or reported, as well as locating their shape and texture from within a particular point of view or experience. It is also a means of setting out the larger temporal framework for analysing the music's historical development.

I should add, too, that some of the voices that appear below having nothing to do with jazz or New Orleans in the first decades of the twentieth century. This is by design. In working through the kinds of issues raised by the concept of the everyday, it became clear to me that in our approach to the music's origins, we have mostly celebrated jazz musicians' mobility, their exile from ordinary experiences and their movement out into the world. We have, however, remained strangely silent about the return home or about those that remained, many of whom pursued other paths. Rita Felski attributes this silence to the vocabulary of modernity used by cultural theorists, which has been consistently suspicious of the home as the site of oppressive banality and domestic routine, and who have staked everything on mythologizing novelty, mobility, unexpected events and chance encounters (Felski, 2000: 86). What these other voices reveal for me, therefore, is a perspective on the significance of (finding or returning to) a home, or a familiar place, that speaks to its complexity as well as its ordinariness, to its mystery along with its predictability.

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[NB. A note about the referencing. This text was first delivered at a conference. Part of the effect I was trying to achieve, which was also the issue I was exploring in the paper, was to let the people in the room experience the different voices - the musicians, writers about place, poets, locals, that I called upon, as well as my own account – without them always knowing whose voice it was that was speaking. Passages of text were framed (or interspersed) only by slides with some key dates, photographs, and place names on them, while the references and acknowledgements were listed on a slide at the end of the presentation. In the translation to the page involved in writing this up, the challenge for me has been to retain that sense of voice, while recognising the conventions (and importance) of scholarly citation. While some references below follow the journal's style guide, others occur as endnotes in order to preserve that initial encounter with the words and their sounds.

Part One

1776, The Forgotten World

Imagine the mangrove-fringed coast, mudflats and silty brown waters. The relentless Equatorial sun beats down. They are far from home, at the edges of Empire. Bodies doubled over and beaten by days of tropical storms and heat and the Atlantic winds. Giant rubber leaves and frangipani and jasmine mixed up with clouds of mosquitos, cockroaches, spiders and flies. Hard to stay focused, alive even. Overseers leave nothing to chance, pushing the bodies as far and fast as they can, shackled pasts held down by the whip and the hunger and the fear of tomorrow.[1]

1786, mid-Atlantic

She was the first to die. A songstress, unnamed as usual. Referred to by a young sailor as an oracle of literature. "In order to render more easily the hours of her sisters' exile," he reported in his diary, the woman would "…sing slow airs, of pathetic nature, and

recite such pieces as moved the passions, exiting joy or grief, pleasure or pain, as fancy or inclination led."[2] Adrift and afloat, fighting currents of past and future, plagued by the threat of insurrection, the ship's Captain paused, just for a moment, and allowed the slaves to the bury their dead. This was not something he would normally have done.

1803, City Walls

Names unknown, places unseen, thousands gone. Snatches of memory, fragments of another life, talked about in quieter moments perhaps, or simply forgotten. But there's no way of knowing any of this, other than to try to imagine how it might have been for us, similarly placed. A danced existence: coming and going, moving in and out of time, unfolding somewhere between a meter and a rhythm. A rate of motion that gives that motion a life of its own. "There is no one," it is said amongst the Ewe.[3] Glanced from the side, a crowd of people gathers together, caught in the being-there of their festivities, old timers and newcomers, drummers and singers, onlookers and outliers. On the periphery they remain, out of focus, more mirage than actuality.

2005, Lake Pontchartrain Causeway

So much water. Stretching out, limitless; or so it seems. The lake marks an edge world, point of dissolution. Crossing over, time stops; or so it seems. "You took so long," she said, "I almost forgot how you looked."

"The bridge gives to the eye the same support for connecting sides of the landscape as it does to the body for practical reality. The mere dynamics of motion, in whose particular reality the 'purpose' of the bridge is exhausted, has become something visible and lasting, just as the portrait brings to a halt, as it were, the physical and mental life process in which the reality of humankind takes place and gathers the emotion of that reality, flowing and ebbing away in time…"[4]

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Drawing a circle in the chaos. Moving outwards, pause; staying close to familiar signs, testing the ground. In-flows and out riders, moments of insistence. Body full of high feeling. Hand-held gestures, following the line… "First time out of the city?" they asked. "Nope, been here before," she answered. "Just once…" Searching for what? A story? A sign of some other path? New densities of mood and motion. "We're glad you made it," they said. Longer days, more talk, time alone, people coming and going. "Should have known it would go this way," they said. "Should have known."

"…and I feel dusk approaching though it is still early afternoon, just slipping, no one here to see this but me, told in loud silence by arcs, contours, swell of wind, billowing, fluent…"[5]

A vision of the road, perhaps, stretched and stretching out… no time to ask what might happen. Already gone, already in motion: absolute, indefinite, defiant but desperate...a monument to platitudes and prototypes and places dreamed of but not yet seen; medium of escape, failure, drive by, commute, connection, disfunction, disrepair, miracle…

"And then there are musicians who didn't want to leave New Orleans to go up North."[6]

1959, Paris

"The man singing it, the man playing it, he makes a place. For as long as the song is being played, *that's* the place he's been looking for. And when the piece is all played

and he's back, it may be he's feeling good; maybe he's making good money or getting good treatment and he's feeling good—or maybe he starts missing the song. Maybe he starts wanting the place he found while he was playing the song. Or maybe it just troubles back at him. The song, it takes a lot out of a man…"[7] Under your breath, hum a refrain; let it find a place in your world.

"Path-building, one could say, is a specifically human achievement; the animal too continuously overcomes a separation and often in the cleverest and most ingenious ways, but its beginning and end remain unconnected, it does not accomplish the miracle of the road."[8]

1912, Ninth Ward,
"It's real sad to me," said Amède, "That I never heard Ferd in person but one time in my life. He came by the house and I asked him to go across the street to a neighbor's and play for me. That day I remember Ferd was wearing a loud silk candy-striped shirt and loud suspenders…Grandma got to fussin at him and he told her he wasn't goin to stay around to be fussed at, and then he left New Orleans and never did come back."[9]

Sometimes it is so hard to find a way back. You wait so long, get caught up in so many plans, that letting go of them seems impossible, bound together, familiar in your longing. Time passes, another year, and what have you got to show for it? Small exchanges with the neighbours, who sometimes look in on you. If they remember. Street talk is easiest, casual, no expectations; a smile will do, or a nod. Working, eating, staying ahead of things, but never really…

"One launches forth, hazards an improvisation…One ventures from home on the thread of a tune."[10]

The bar is upstairs. He waits for him to arrive. Downstairs, the smell of the grill overpowers everything else, squeezing out any trace of poetry. Low-ceiling, not a lot of chairs, and the faded decorations a painful reminder someone else's wildest dreams. Seated at one of the booths, a couple of regulars talk in murmurs. A broken fan in the corner; stuck there for how long? "What's the point," he thought.

On the day he left she got up early, made sure that he had everything he needed, and helped him pack the car. After he drove off, she looked in some of their friends, kept busy, worried all the time about what could happen. So far from anyone or anywhere. Time passes too fast, another month gone, and barely any word. She's worried now. Small exchanges with the neighbours, who sometimes look in on her. They remember, but there's something about the way they look. Not quite pity, but…

"I mean," he remarked in an interview, much later on, "New Orleans gave an incredible vision of new possibilities."[11]

1940, Yreka, California, 9 November
"Well dearest, I thought I would drop you a line, to let you know that I am safe. I started and decided to go west, and believe me, when I hit Pennsylvania and every state thereafter I met terrific storms—as follows, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Kansas, Wyoming, Idaho, Oregon, California…I am trying to find some kind of good climate and will soon or I will keep roaming until I do…"[12]

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At the end of the edge of the day, daylight drifting, dissolved, liquid memories…

When we were together, she recalled years later, we always talked of going back. But something always came up for him. A new plan, a scheme, quick money, a love affair, a deal. “Ha,” she said. “It’s too late for that. But I’ve got some plans now.” Dreams on hold, projects unrealised.

Bathurst, New South Wales, 1973
It’s a small town on the Western Plains. He had just begun taking music lessons on the cornet, having badgered his parents for several years beforehand to let him make a start, and at some point, they gave him a recording of Louis Armstrong’s Hot Fives. Perhaps so he had an example of what could be done on the instrument. He still remembers the confusion caused by the music that came blasting out of their small family stereo. There were definitely elements that were recognisable; he knew them from listening to the local brass band. But nothing else made much sense. This was especially true of Potato Head Blues, which sounded like a riot to play, but he hadn’t the faintest idea of what the band were doing or how they were doing it.

“The ordinary throws itself together out of forms, flows, powers, pleasures, encounters, distractions, drudgery, denials, practical solutions, shape-shifting forms of violence, daydreams, and opportunities lost or found...”[13] (Stewart, 2007: 29).

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Garden District, 1989
Breakfast was coffee and donuts most days. Nowhere specific, and sometimes the supermarket was just fine. Seated on the porch of the old house, or a corner spot in one of the cafes along the edges of the French Quarter, days passed. Lunchtimes we usually met at the diner off Esplanade, a way of catching up on or going over things done or felt or unsaid. The food was cheap and inside it was always lively. A good place to talk and plan what to do next, what to see. One afternoon, a few days in, we caught the trolley car to the Garden District, then on to Tulane, in search of the archive. The campus was emptied out for summer, but a librarian was there, friendly and interested in our visit. We weren’t sure what we were looking for yet, but just the chance to see it was enough. Goodbyes, promises of a return visit, then we turn towards the main street, in search of a way back.

St. Claude Street, 1917
“I shocked the Barbarin family early when I moved back with my mother. One day at lunch time, which was every day between twelve and one, my grandmother served my uncles and myself at the large table. As soon as I receive my plate I picked it up and went over and sat with my grandfather Isodore, blessed my food (which my uncles never did), and started a conversation about music and then horses.”[14]

1986, The Music Lesson
It was a long bus ride, two hours at least. To the right, traversing outwards and on endlessly towards the horizon was the Pacific; to the left, nothing but storefronts and motels and fast food restaurants and surf shops and gas stations and supermarkets. Early morning humidity, 100%. Blue moving through blue moving across stretches of sand; a slight breeze wrapped around rows of palm trees and curling between sea and sky and

shoreline, catching the murmur of the board riders and their friends in pursuit of the perfect break. It was a long way to go for a music lesson, and it was hot.

Part Two

<u>1992, Jackson Square</u>
In those days it was either live with the music or die with the noise…or so Ali told me. The room was small and empty. In one corner there was mattress where he slept. There was also a set of drawers for his clothes, a bedside lamp, a prayer mat, a copy of the Koran, and his saxophone in its case, leaning against the windowpane. Not much else though. I first went to the house with James, who also lived there. The house was on Columbus Street, which runs parallel to Esplanade – one of the main streets that bounds the French Quarter – in the Seventh Ward. It's been so long since I was there, though, that I don't really remember how the house looked on the outside or even the house number.

James and I had known each other for a while. We first met in 1989, on my second trip to the city. I had hitched-hiked from Savannah, Georgia, via Florida and the Gulf Coast, with a friend. Early one morning, my friend and I were sitting at Café Du Monde, the famous New Orleans coffee house on the corner of Jackson Square in the French Quarter, when I heard his conga. James was in his fifties (at least I think he was). Tall, bearded, with a shaved head, he had a deep, rumbling voice and a laugh that scattered seagulls. He always wore a black waistcoat, even when it was forty degrees Celsius in the shade, which conveyed a casual elegance to his listeners. Sometimes, especially on Sundays, he wore a hat, often tipped backwards. After returning from the Vietnam War, he had drifted around the United States for a while, playing music with anyone he encountered along the way, and working at different jobs when he needed to make some extra money, until eventually he had settled in New Orleans. He was gentle, affectionate, eloquent and very funny; and he seemed to know everyone in town.

But let's get back to that moment, in the Café Du Monde. It was probably a day or so after we had arrived in the city, and that time before the heat of the day begins to capture everything within its languid folds. The Café was full of locals, the conversation lively, but still contained by the morning light and the thread of familiarity. The tour buses haven't arrived either, so you could actually get a seat outside without having to wait in a long queue. It was the perfect spot to watch the city pull itself out of the night, allowing the regular rhythms of the daytime rituals to take over once more. In the distance, someone's radio blares a pop tune, vocalist blasting out an anthem to lost love, while the street cleaners wind their way across Jackson Square, whistling and singing, jiving at each other, chatting to the dog walkers, and waking the drunks. And so there we were, on one of those mornings, when I heard the congas and went over to see who was playing them.

By the time we met, James had been performing in the streets of New Orleans for several years and had gradually moved up through the ranks to occupy one of the top busking positions in the city. During the day, he performed under a beautiful magnolia tree next to Café Du Monde, within earshot of the crowds of tourists who got off their buses nearby to take photos of Jackson Square, visit the Café and generally soak up the atmosphere of the Square. At night, he also occupied one of the most sought-after spots

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on the boardwalk, overlooking the Mississippi and next to the various riverboats. A goldmine for buskers, or so I was to discover.

Walking over to talk to him that morning, however, I had to get past a crowd of tourists who had just gotten off their bus, and then wait patiently, while each one dutifully placed a dollar in his hat! “Hey man,” he said, when he saw me standing there. “Hi,” I replied. “I really like what you’re doing.” “You play?” “Yeah.” I said. “All right. You got it with you.” “Yeah, it’s back where I’m staying.” “Right. Bring it here tomorrow. 9am?” “Absolutely,” I said. Nothing more. He went back to playing his tunes.

Now, what I came to realise over the next months, as I joined James every morning out front of Café Du Monde, and again at night on the boardwalk, is that New Orleans street musicians lead an elaborate social life that hardly intersects with the widely documented lives of the city’s famous professional musicians or the equally well-known neighbourhood brass bands.

A person’s busking spot was theirs for two or three hours a day, and then they had to move on to allow someone else to occupy it. If you didn’t show up for consecutive days, someone else could move into your spot, but their claim was based on how established their position was within the local scene and the spot’s relative proximity to a major tourist site. It was a complex equation. Changes and disputes around position were negotiated on a daily basis when the regular afternoon thunderstorm sent everybody rushing inside a café on Decatur Street, which acted as the buskers’ unofficial social club. We spent an hour or so in this café each day while it rained, discussing business, making our plans for the evening, and playing chess. At night we performed for three or four hours, until the tourist trade had quietened down, and then we headed for Checkpoint Charlie, a bar just outside the French Quarter, for a nightly open mike, where we got to know many of the other street musicians.

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1992, Mississippi Boardwalk

I met Ali three years later, when I had returned to New Orleans for another visit. Once again, I connected with James at Café Du Monde, and it wasn’t long before I started performing with him on a daily basis. One evening, while we were playing on the boardwalk, a guy walked up to us carrying a tenor saxophone. James nodded, the guy got his saxophone out, and started to play. Now, mostly up there, on the boardwalk, James and I worked with the standards, or maybe a pop song that somebody requested, and we usually did pretty well. But Ali had no interest in this. He was here for something else. When he played, eyes closed, he tried to connect his sound to the river, to play melodies that followed its bends, got caught in it currents, became entangled in its history, and spoke to its future. The first time this happened, James said, “Just keep up, don’t get distracted by what he’s playing. Listen to what the notes are telling you.” I didn’t really understand. It seemed crazy to me, hard to follow, and he was scaring off the tourists anyway. But then, over time, I came to understand what Ali was up to. He was trying to get past the notes, to find in music a way of living that was more than just about following rules or mastering a technique or making a judgement. He was searching for a way of being in the music that made it possible to live with the noise…or so he told me anyway.

Part Three

1924, Chicago

The year she left the city, it felt as though anything was possible. Or that's what she thought, anyway. But she had no concrete plans, except to move north, find her sister, get a better job, make a different life. This was the dream she should have, so they said. But for her, as for so many of her friends and family, things weren't that simple. Saving for the train took forever, on the journey she was cold and hardly slept on the wooden bench, and then there was no one to meet her at the station. Maybe there was some confusion or her letter was lost. "Surely," she said to herself, "I must have given them the right time." Everyday odysseys, barely observed; just one of thousands of arrivals and departures each day. Nothing special in any of that, except that this was her chance.

Sitting at the kitchen window now, in the apartment, one of her pleasures was to listen to the cacophony of noises in the courtyard below. Looking up, she noticed the sky, squeezed to a small strip of blue, just visible between the sharp edges of the building and the density of people and voices and bricks and sheets drying on lines and flowers overhanging the ledges.

Ninth Ward, 2006

"Virtually everywhere one looks, the processes of human movement and encounter are long-established and complex. Cultural centers, discrete regions and territories, do not exist prior to contacts, but are sustained through them, appropriating and disciplining the restless movements of people and things"[15] When the bridge finally collapsed, as the towers had four years earlier, the shock was beyond comprehension. Something broke, then and there, in the promise that had long kept the vision of new possibilities open, that had tied them to each other, always hoping for something to change. Getting back into the city was hard work. It took months to find the strength, get the money from the government, organise a ride. Some of the neighbours were gone for good, their houses abandoned. "People we'd grown up with, shared out lives," they recalled. Marks of toil and turbulence on the walls, cars rusting and piled up behind fences. Some of the homes were being restored brick by brick, but still everywhere, gaps, streets neglected, caught in waves of sadness and despair. The Road Home.

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Storyville, 1917

The primal scene of departure. Gathered together for one last meal, lamenting the loss of their homes, jobs, stories they share, the good times, and music in the night, they call on the two of them for one last song. Everyone agrees, things have to be said, issues noted, debts paid; let's be clear about what happened and what will come next. A premonition of futures past. Farewells said, tickets bought, nothing taken for granted, they rise to leave together, led by the mournful tones of voice and trumpet, entangled in the expectations placed on them and the force of events unfolding before them. As they walk the streets of the French Quarter one last time, their mood is defiant, poised, refusing closure, bound together by a commonality of experience, a community founded on and through song. "I've got to say goodbye to my family," she tells him. "I'll catch up with you later." "We'll never find each other," he replies. This myth of the music's beginning is inseparable from the question "Where do we find ourselves?" To which one possible answer is, "No one is quite sure anymore." As if they ever were. But the question keeps coming up. It is probably enough to say that certainty of purpose, of direction, remains out of reach for now, each time unravelling in the familiarity of everyday exchanges, caught off guard by a glance, sideways, to see what's going to happen next. The Road Home.

…and in the end they hovered, somewhere between being known and unknown, a feeling held at the edges, their paths criss-crossing along ancient trade routes remade as circuits of spectacle. Now dispersed, then connected, waiting to be discovered; a life they had made together, but just not quite yet.

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[8] Simmel, ibid: 6
[9] Colas cited in Lomax, 2001:37
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[14] Barker, 1986: 25
[15] Clifford, 1997: 3

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