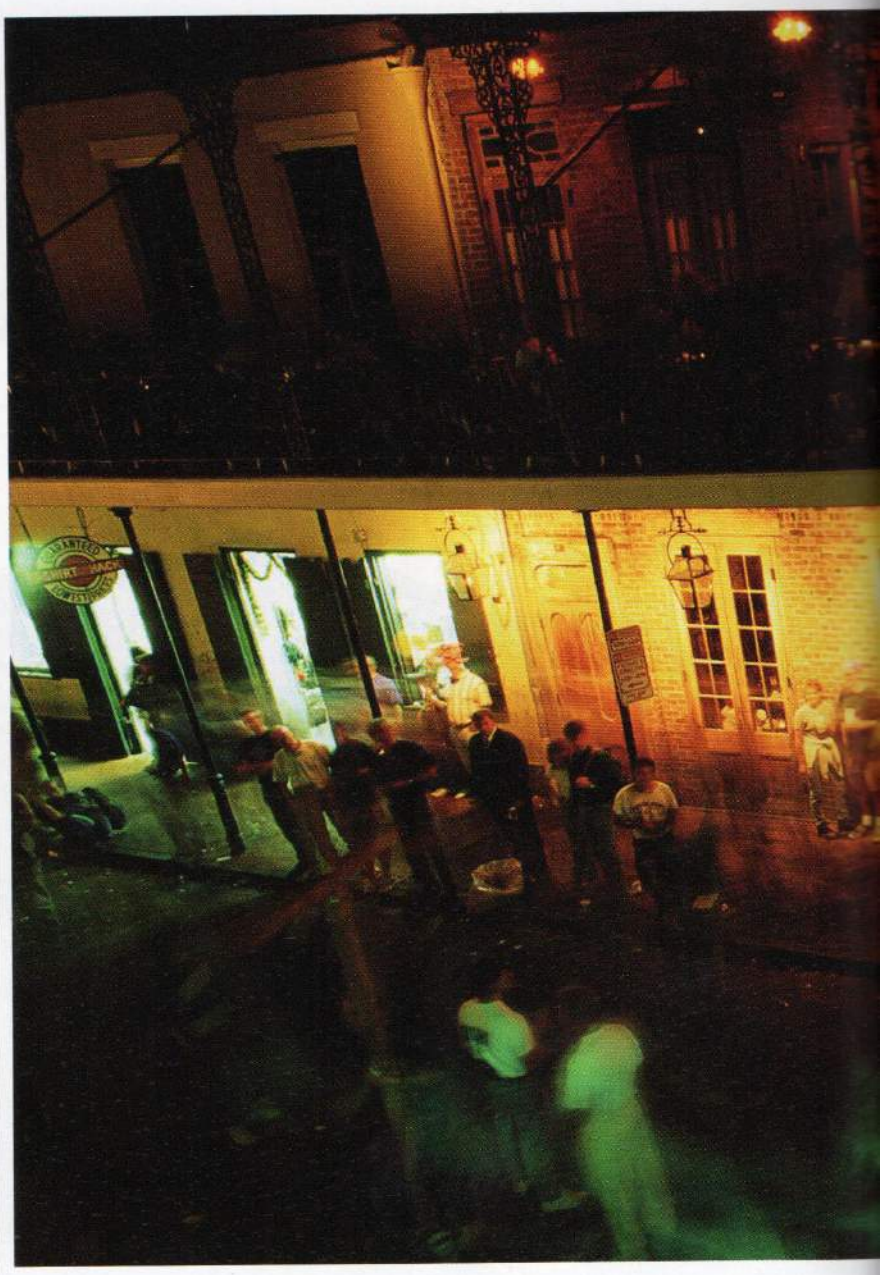
BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG EASY

Jazz and jambalaya, gumbo and go-cups, second-lines and Sazeracs. No other city in the United States—or dare we say, the world—intoxicates the senses and the soul quite like New Orleans. Ten years after Katrina, the unrelenting magic of the Crescent City is not only alive and well, it's dancing up a storm.

Words by Kim Reyes



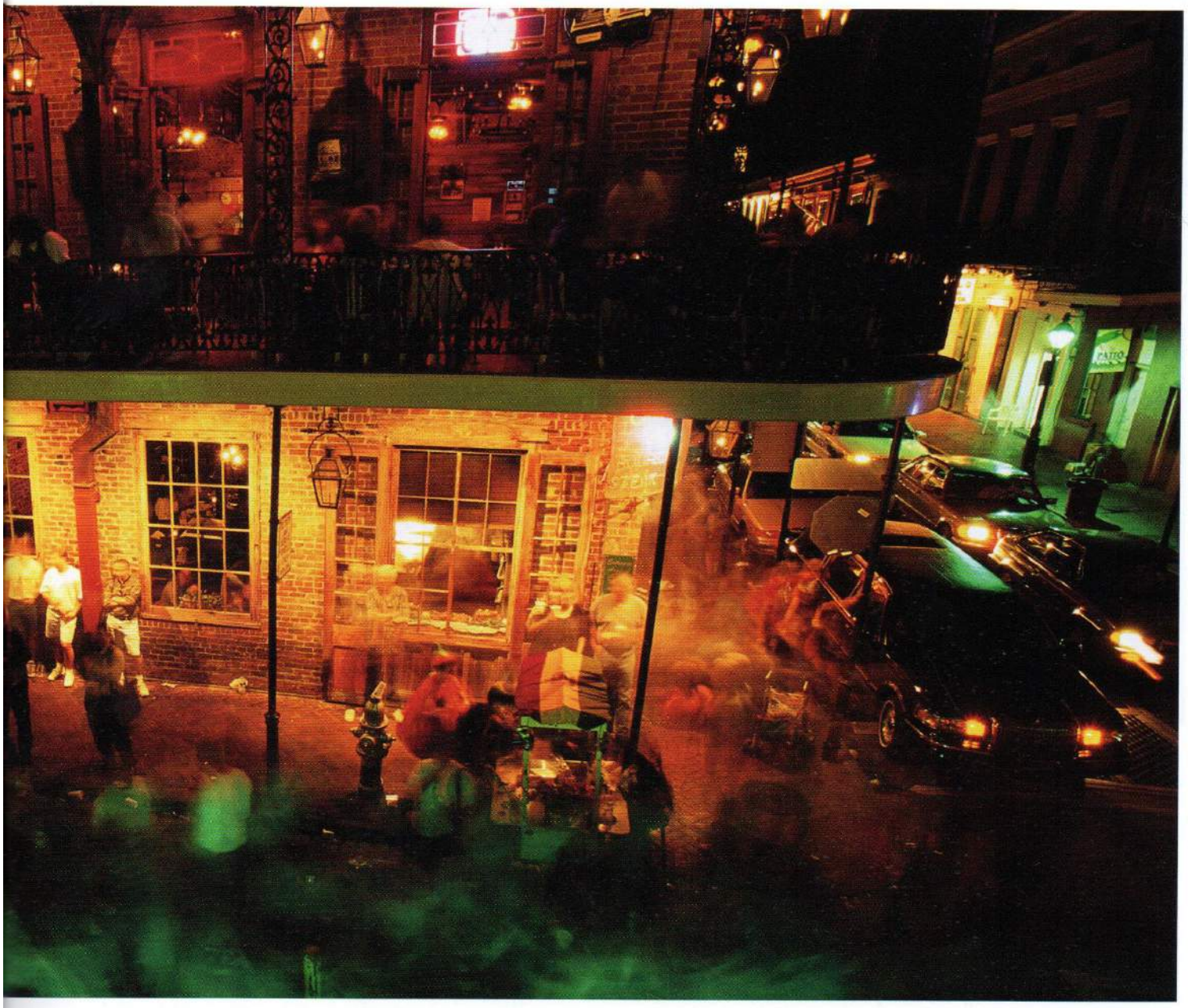
IT'S 8:30AM, and there are snaking queues at Café du Monde, which I suspect has been the case long before Jon Favreau's *Chef* filmed a scene at the iconic Decatur Street spot, famous for its beignets: rectangular doughnuts topped with powdered sugar. "Eat it slow," he tells his son in the film. "You're never going to taste your first beignet again."

We get chicory-laced *café au lait* with two bags of beignets to go, and find a bench on the riverfront where barges float across the Mississippi while we take our first, slow, languorous bites. I'm savouring the sensation of popping my beignet cherry when a gust of wind blows powdered sugar up my nose—I look like Al Pacino in that scene in *Scarface*, but I'd bet these unfathomably fluffy fried wads of dough are more addictive than whatever he was snorting.

If there's any word that could best sum up a visitor's experience to New Orleans, it's just that—*addictive*. Maybe, they lace their po'boys with a sprinkling of fairy dust, or hide subliminal voodoo messages in their trad-jazz standards, but there's something eerily infectious about the Big Easy that works its charms on you like a spell—an unmistakable joy that permeates every aspect of daily life; something even a hurricane can't blow away.

It's been a decade since New Orleans drowned under the fury of Hurricane Katrina, the most harrowing natural disaster in recent United States' history, but the city has since rebuilt itself with fervour and a newfound spirit of entrepreneurship. Its metro population is currently at over 90 percent of what it was before the storm, and the city has become more economically vibrant since. But what's most telling about the spirit of New Orleans is that its locals refused to cancel Mardi Gras, the country's biggest street party, in 2006—six months after the storm—citing it as not only important for the city's recovery as a tourist destination, but an essential psychological survival tool.

That doesn't exactly help New Orleans shake off its reputation as a debaucherous party town. On Bourbon Street, which has become a cultural caricature for the seedy hedonism of the city—*New Orleans: The Theme Park* edition—I pass endless signs for "Huge Ass Beers" and "Naked Chicks" amid neon lights and tacky T-shirt shops. Later that night, I witness college-aged girls lifting up their tops and flashing their tits towards one of the balconies, where boys throw down cheap strings of coloured shiny beads that sell at the mini-mart for USD1.99. It's not even Carnival season; it's a Thursday in the middle of October.



Above
Just another ordinary evening in New Orleans.

Over two centuries have passed since New Orleans became part of the US, but even to this day, it remains an anomaly to the rest of the country. Originally claimed by France in the 18th century, New Orleans has always had a radically different cultural climate from the rest of British-colonised North America. As a port city, whose prevailing language was French, it became a gateway for trade in the 19th century, playing host to a diverse range of cultures, including Spanish, African, Caribbean, English, Irish, Latin American and the Acadians deported from Canada—known today as Cajuns.

There's no understating the effect this cultural hodgepodge has had on modern-day New Orleans—it's evident in the architecture, the food, the music, the traditions. From Creole cooking and Louisiana voodoo to Mardi Gras Indians and the birth of jazz, the Crescent City's heritage as a multicultural melting pot is its most defining characteristic.

The French influence is particularly apparent in the local vernacular. American English is interspersed with French-sounding words and names like Robicheaux and Faubourg Marigny. But even my travelling companion—my Parisian suburb-transplanted French boyfriend—isn't much help here. While the language looks typically French, the New Orleanian adaptations can sound far from it. Vieux Carré, the alternate name for the French Quarter, is "voo kah-RAY", but Chartres Street is pronounced "charters". New Orleans' second-oldest restaurant Tujague's? "Two-jacks."

Even the city's name is a classic linguistic conundrum, apparently only pronounced "Noo-or-LEENZ" in song, probably because it's easier to rhyme than the more commonly spoken "Noo-AWE-linz". But we also heard "Noo-AWE-lee-unz", "NWAH-yuns", and the astonishing monosyllabic "Nawln". A simple "Noo-OAR-lins" rolls easily off the tongue and satisfies locals just fine. (But for God's sake, don't go around saying "Nawlins" like some displaced Blanche DuBois.)

We quench our thirst at Lafitte's Blacksmith

CORBIS

Shop, considered the oldest bar in the US, reputedly haunted, and once owned by a pirate. It's our first drink in the Big Easy, so we go with the popular Hurricane, a cloyingly sweet concoction of juice, syrup and two kinds of rum, served in a giant plastic cup that looks more like the bucket you'd use to collect coins from the slots in Vegas than something you'd drink from.

But the cup bears special purpose—here, it's called a go-cup. New Orleans is one of the only cities in the country without a strict open-container law, allowing anyone of legal age to consume alcoholic beverages in public at any time, as long as it's in a plastic container or aluminium can. That means it's perfectly acceptable (and common) to see people drinking wine or Abita—New Orleans' brewery of choice—on the sidewalk before lunch. Bored of the bar you're in? Transfer your cocktail into a go-cup and get moving.

Emerging from Lafitte's darkness (both figurative and literal—they never installed electric lights), I find myself reaching out to my boyfriend for balance, quickly realising that these Hurricanes are indeed liquefied cyclones of destruction. Inebriated and it's not even noon, but as they say here, *laissez les bons temps rouler* (Cajun expression for "Let the good times roll!"). I take a few more gulps.

Ambling on Royal Street to browse antique shops, we stop occasionally for musical interludes courtesy of street musicians. They pop up every couple of blocks—a lively ragtime troupe on the corner with a killer clarinet player, two girls plucking fiddles further down, a lone jazz saxophonist barely old enough to drive—and most could probably play circles around even the most talented Orchard Street busker.

Live music here is practically considered a basic human right: everyone should experience it, and most of the time, it's free. That evening on Frenchman Street in the Marigny, the nucleus of the city's live music scene, we peer into clubs that stand door-to-door, clashing styles of music pouring out of each venue to form a sonic assault of frenetic brass, wailing Fenders and head-bopping drums. Are we in the mood for old-school jazz, zydeco, brass band, Cajun, blues? Is that club too packed, too empty? Isn't that Japanese guitarist June Yamagishi, who made notable cameos in HBO's *Treme*, the ode-to-New-Orleans show by *The Wire* creator David Simon, shredding a solo onstage?

The music most associated with the Crescent City is, of course, jazz. In the early 19th century, African and Caribbean slaves and free men of colour gathered on Sundays in Congo Square (now within Louis Armstrong Park), where the rhythmic drumming and syncopation of their homelands would combine with work songs and spirituals to form the

Top
The Carousel Piano Bar & Lounge is the only revolving bar in New Orleans. This means even if the drinks don't get you, the slow spinning will.

Right
Evidence of the research conducted by our writer

precursor to what would eventually become jazz.

Legends like Buddy Bolden, King Oliver, Kid Ory and Sidney Bechet pioneered the sound now referred to as traditional New Orleans jazz, and popularised by the city's most famous son, Louis Armstrong. The tradition is carried on and often re-interpreted by internationally renowned New Orleanians like Wynton Marsalis, Terence Blanchard, and Kermit Ruffins. But the music of the Big Easy extends beyond brass-led jazz—there's R&B from the likes of Dr John and the Neville Brothers, and soul crooners like Irma Thomas, who can still bring down a house filled with people half her age. Since the '80s, there's also been a thriving hip-hop scene which spawned bounce, the twerk-errific, ass-shaking homegrown sub-genre propagated by rappers like Big Freedia and Lil Wayne.

After catching the end of Yamagishi's funk set at the Blue Nile, rousing hollers and blaring trumpet notes lure us into The Maison a few doors down, where The Brass-A-Holics are hammering out upbeat tunes punctuated by rapping and the brassy sounds of a trombone, a sax and a sousaphone. Known for covering a mix of genres, from Miles and Coltrane to Nirvana and Kanye, The Brass-A-Holics end their musical onslaught with a cover of Prince's "Purple Rain."

Back on the street, the all-too-familiar *eau de Abita* permeates the sidewalks, emanating from spilled go-cups or abandoned beer cans, but it's suddenly overpowered by the smoky aroma of charred meat. On the corner of Chartres and Frenchmen, someone's set up a barbecue grill behind a car and propped up a table on the sidewalk for paper plates and bottles of Crystal hot sauce.

Like a pair of puppy-eyed teenaged lovers, you can't ever seem to separate food and music in New Orleans. Music festivals are accompanied by gumbo gatherings, while food festivals enlist raucous brass bands to bellow out tunes while locals nosh on barbecue shrimp and crawfish *étouffée*. Kermit Ruffins, the city's charming musical poster-boy who served as consultant and recurring character on *Treme*, named his band The Barbecue Swingers for his habit of hauling along a grill to gigs and serving up sausages or ribs with red beans and rice between sets.

With any excuse to celebrate, local festivals pop up every weekend and are an ideal way to sample a variety of local specialties in one spot. My trip luckily coincides with the Louisiana Seafood Festival in City Park, where we feast on signature dishes from iconic restaurants like oyster, artichoke and andouille sausage from Antoine's and charbroiled oysters grilled with garlic-butter and cheese from Drago's. At USD6 a bowl for the Red Fish Grill's alligator sausage and seafood gumbo, whose rich, dark *roux* gives it a pleasantly smoky kick, we're tempted to order seconds before I spot the voodoo shrimp and grits. Made with a dash of Southern Comfort, it's a creamy, pink mess with the texture of chunky oatmeal, but tastes like a sublime marriage between sweet shrimp bisque and gritty congee.

As the city's most well known dish, gumbo is one of the most overused metaphors for New

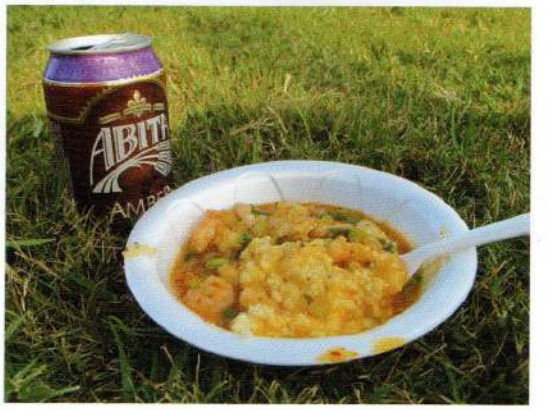
Above
A couple photobombing street musicians. Oh wait, they're dancing to the music? Oh carry on.

Orleans itself. The Creole stew binds disparate ingredients like okra, andouille sausage, sassafras and rice together in an exotic yet comforting concoction boasting layers of spice, texture and colour that equates to more than just the sum of its parts. It's a fitting analogy for the city's mélange of cultures, surely, not least for the fact that food is one of the key differentiators that sets New Orleans apart from most of the US. A blend of French, West African, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Native American influences, the Creole cuisine that originated in New Orleans bears a distinctive taste based on depth of flavour from rich sauces, spices, indigenous herbs and locally sourced seafood.

New Orleans was one of America's great food cities before the storm in 2005, but the scene has only gotten better. Taxi drivers will be quick to boast that the city has over 600 more restaurants now than it did pre-Katrina, which says a lot about New Orleanians' priorities. In the wake of the disaster, while the city struggled to rebuild physically and emotionally, the locals collectively agreed, "We need more places to eat."

History is sacred here, so the city still cherishes its time-tested culinary institutions—legendary *grandes dames* like Commander's Palace in the affluent Garden District, surrounded by Southern plantation-style mansions owned by people like Sandra Bullock, John Goodman and Anne Rice; and Galatoire's, where the gentlemen have been wearing jackets to dinner since 1905. Even casual spots like Willie Mae's Scotch House in the Tremé and local lunch counter Johnny's Po-Boys, the city's oldest family-owned po'boy shop, impart a certain civic pride.

But it's the post-Katrina restaurants that are attracting hip locals and visiting gastronomes for their honest interpretations of classic NOLA eats. Cochon, with its award-winning modern Cajun cuisine, opened mere months after the storm, while its more casual sister eatery, Cochon Butcher, brings the Cajun influence to the delicatessen. In the Bywater, the unpretentious Bacchanal is fronted by a wine store and serves up eclectic dishes like whole branzino and pork chops in its backyard patio.



Cocktails in the Big Easy are in a class of their own, too. The influential Tales of the Cocktail event, a creative gathering of mixologists, chefs, bartenders and designers—happens here every summer. Fittingly, New Orleans is the only US city that has its own official cocktail—the Sazerac.

For the iconic version of this classic poison, we seek out its namesake, The Sazerac Bar in the classy Roosevelt Hotel, where the bartenders look as sharp as the Herbsaint tastes. Another watering hole too curious to ignore, The Carousel Bar at the Hotel Monteleone, was Truman Capote's *boîte* of choice in his hometown. By some stroke of luck, we snag two highly coveted seats on the 25-seat merry-go-round that rotates around the bar in the centre, making a full revolution every 15 minutes. It only takes two turns to finish our Brandy Milk Punch and Ramos Gin Fizz.

Properly tipsy, we follow a local vintage shop owner's advice and duck straight into The Spotted Cat, a shoebox dive on Frenchmen with a much more laidback atmosphere than the rump-shaking

Above
One of the many music festivals in New Orleans.

Above right
What goes well with music? Beer and jambalaya.

vibe at Maison, but the music is still a swinging delight. With a stage set up in the corner by the door, what little floor space is left is occupied by shoulder-rubbing locals sashaying to the New Orleans Cottonmouth Kings, a sextet that includes a clarinet and a violin, playing the kind of old-school Dixieland jazz standards that make me feel like I'm in the credits of a Woody Allen movie. (Though forever associated with New York, Allen is a New Orleans jazz aficionado, using tunes by Sidney Bechet, King Oliver and Jelly Roll Morton in his movies. He even plays the clarinet—badly, he admits—with his New Orleans Jazz Band.)

A night of jazz and booze invites a mild hangover the next morning, so for a little dose of spiritual healing, we put on our Sunday best and cross the northern border of the Quarter past Rampart Street into the Tremé, the oldest African-American neighbourhood in the country and the cultural crux of black New Orleans.

At St Augustine Church, the first black Catholic church in the US, every Sunday at 10AM is the gospel jazz mass—what some have called one of the best free concerts in the city. On the side of the building is a tilted cross made of rusted oversized chain links and dangling shackles. This is the Tomb of the Unknown Slave, a moving tribute to the scores of African slaves who died at the hands of treachery or disease in the historic Faubourg Tremé. The church's damaged roof and bell tower, meanwhile, are reminders of the more recent horrors of Katrina, as are neighbouring houses that are still boarded up, bearing the symbolic spray-painted X-code signalling the home has been searched by rescue teams.

You don't have to be Catholic to sit in for mass, so visiting tourists clutching cameras stick out like a sore thumb, but the mostly African-American parish congregation shows no prejudice or judgement. On the contrary, we're immediately greeted with "good morning" and warmly welcomed. During the Sign of Peace, parishioners leave their pews to exchange friendly embraces, handshakes and smiles, and we're treated with the same familiarity. A group of elderly French tourists look bewildered at the idea of interacting, but manage some meek handshakes.

Remembering the days when I was forced to sit through one-hour mass by my staunchly Catholic parents, this service pushes two hours, but I don't check the time once. The captivating gospel choir and accompanying band keep everyone en-

Right
The image of Uncle Lionel Batiste, a role model to muscians and a stalwart figure in the jazz community. Batiste died in 2012 and the banner hangs as an homage.

Below
History resonates through the architecture of the buildings.

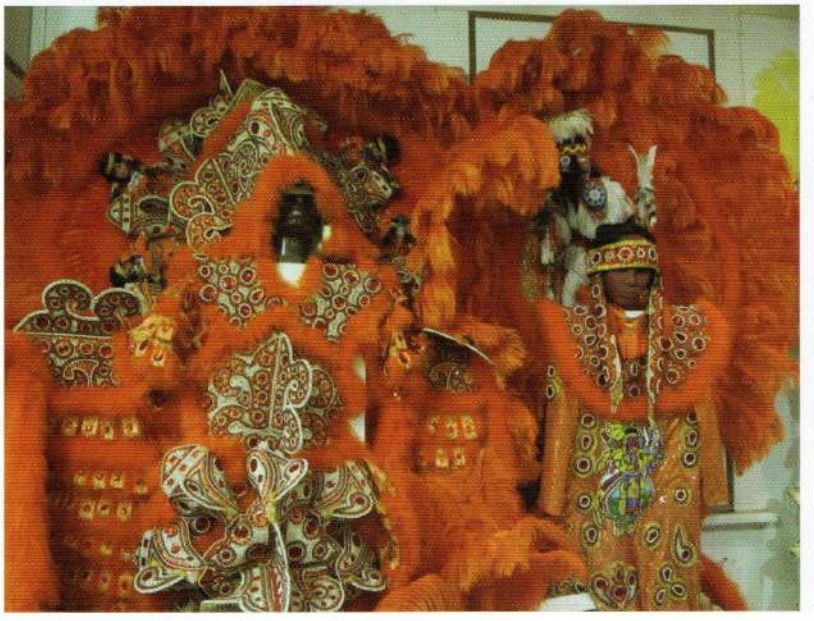
tranced, but it's the remarkable gospel solos that echo through the chapel with stirring emotional resonance. Signalling the end of the mass, the choir performs an uplifting number, and no one is in any hurry to leave. We're standing, clapping, laughing. It's transcendent.

The woman occupying the pew in front of us, an elderly black lady wearing a purple hat, eagerly asks what we thought of the service. While I'm struggling to articulate feelings beyond "amazing," she notices the tears that have escaped down my cheek and gives me a knowing look. She's probably used to seeing this reaction from first-time visitors. "Isn't it so moving?" she says. "This is why I come—the spirit is here. I feel it." I know exactly what she means.

Across from St Augustine's is the Backstreet Cultural Museum, housed in a former funeral home. It doesn't look like much from the outside, but within its two parlour rooms, the opposite is true. Inside, it's an explosion of feathers, ostrich plumes, beads, rhinestones and sequins in a kaleidoscopic array of vibrant yellows, oranges, pinks and blues. This is the cultural mecca of the elusive New Orleans tradition and phenomenon known as the Mardi Gras Indians.

Housing the most comprehensive collection of cultural folklore dedicated to Mardi Gras Indians, second-line parades and jazz funerals, the museum is a visual anthropological archive of the century-old ritualistic masking traditions of working-class black men and women in New Orleans—a repository of donated suits, headdresses, tribal flags, news articles, memorabilia, artefacts, photographs and videos collected and chronicled by Sylvester Francis, who's spent a half-century basking in the traditions and opened the museum in 1999.

Right
The entrance to the Louis Armstrong Park or what we think would be the jazz version of the Pearly Gates.



Below
Costumes of the Mardi Gras Indians.

The tradition's exact origins are uncertain, but it stems from the late 19th century as a tribute to the Native Americans who aided runaway African slaves. Segregated from official Mardi Gras parades, black communities staged their own street celebrations wearing these suits, which sometimes turned into violent confrontations between warring "tribes". Today, they're all about pageantry.

"Imagine he's carryin' two o' you on his back all day, and it's 90 degrees," says Robert Francis, Sylvester's brother, who willingly opened the museum to us on a Sunday. He's referring to the jaw-dropping eight-foot-tall Mardi Gras Indian suits, which need to be seen to be believed—each painstakingly sewn for up to a year from thousands of dollars in plumes and costume jewels and weighing as much as 200LB. From elaborately beaded "aprons" depicting a symbolic scene to three-dimensional animal shapes made up of an intricate patchwork of sequins, the artisanal suit designs reference the ceremonial dress and war bonnets of Native Americans, but also West African Yoruba beadwork and Afro-Caribbean costumes.

Peacocking in its severest form, there's no spectacle quite like the clash of Indian tribes parading through the Tremé streets on Mardi Gras and Super Sunday in March, dancing to a drumbeat, shouting Creole call-and-response chants like, *"Tu way pocky way!"*, and Big Chiefs competing over who's the "prettiest".

Crowds that trail the parades are known as second lines, a tradition that arose from jazz funerals where revellers dance, sing and join in on the parade behind the marching brass band-led main line like a moving block party. Second-line parades pop up all over New Orleans during Carnival, and there's one almost every Sunday of the year.

Robert points us in the direction of a second line currently underway on Tchoupitoulas, and I can't think of a better way to end our New Orleans experience. Truly, this city is more than words or images can convey—behind every flamboyant Mardi Gras Indian suit, every jovial street parade, every tongue-burning jambalaya and every shrill trumpet wail is a deep-rooted and meaningful culture of tradition that reveres the richly diverse (and sometimes painful) history of the unique place they call home.

And it's that irresistible respect-the-past-but-live-for-today attitude that seduces visitors to come back and compels locals to never leave. It's a contagious, resilient spirit that refuses to die—whatever storm comes their way.