COMMENTARY

Satchmo, Bechet made jazz emerge triumphant


Quin Hillyer

To all you wonderful Super Bowl visitors, a word to the wise: If you leave this city with memories only of football and booze, without a fuller appreciation of the unique culture of New Orleans, you will have massively short-changed yourself.

You also will miss understanding how this city's music mirrors one of this country's greatest character traits.

New Orleans hosts this Super Bowl during the winter marking the 100th anniversary of two recordings, both featuring the same jazz musicians from Louisiana, that arguably changed the entire trajectory of American music.

Music historians may quibble whether these two recordings deserve primacy, in terms of cultural impact, over dozens of others made at the same time — but almost none will disagree about the musical significance of the two key, virtuoso performances in each song.

Go ahead: Do a web search now for the Clarence Williams versions of "Mandy Make Up Your Mind" and of "Cake Walking Babies from Home." Listen as you read this.

The virtuosos from the Crescent City, usually acclaimed as the two greatest wind-instrument performers of New Orleans traditional jazz, were the young cornetist Louis Armstrong, just coming into his full bloom, and the soprano-saxophonist Sidney Bechet, four years Armstrong's senior. They were brought together by band leader/pianist Clarence Williams of Plaquemine, Louisiana, and joined by New Orleanian banjoist Buddy Christian and two others.

Only in this short series of recordings in the winter of 2024-25 did Armstrong and Bechet record together before Bechet moved to Paris to find greater fame (while facing less racism). What resulted, especially in "Mandy" and "Cake Walking Babies" — the first on Dec. 17, 2024, and the latter three weeks later — was sheer magic.

In the second half of "Mandy," Bechet brought out a rare instrument called a sarrusophone "to snort and bark his way through the ensemble," as Armstrong historian Ricky Riccardi wrote. And in "Cake Walking Babies," the two musicians seem to vie for supremacy, trying to outshine each other even as their instruments complemented one another, in what Riccardi likened to a heavyweight prize fight and another reviewer (name unknown) described as "a cutting contest between the dueling Satch and Bechet."

Most remarkable, and what was in some ways *the* essential facet of traditional New Orleans jazz, was that amid the dueling lead performers, the group never lost its character as an ensemble performance involving individual and collective improvisation around a still-recognizable melody. The tune remained intact, but each musician experimented at the margins with his individual part.

The result was an invigorating revelation to millions of listeners.

Just as these recordings were being made, three culturally revolutionary developments were fully conjoining for the first time. First, the music itself: What became known as "jazz" had been around by then for some 20 years, growing in New Orleans from its roots in ragtime, blues and other influences — but it still had been somewhat of a "niche" sound, vying with marching tunes, chamber music and popular ballads. Likewise, sound recording was half a century old and commercially available for two decades, but still essentially a novelty. Finally, radio broadcasts technically were available by the first decade of the 20th century, but not widely.

Suddenly, circa 1924 or 1925, all three came together for mass audiences. Jazz had become the popular rage in New York and Chicago music venues by the mid-1920s; the loss of patent protection made phonographs far more widely available in the exact same time frame; and improvements in broadcast capabilities resulted in an explosion from just five radio stations in the whole country in 1921 to 571 by 1925.

Into this mix, with fortuitous timing, came the extraordinary combination of the talents of Armstrong and Bechet, backed by mostly Louisianan compatriots. That's how, 100 years ago this winter, New Orleans jazz became *the* predominant sound in living rooms across America. Gone was the idea of music as being tightly controlled and centrally directed. Here was something more free to innovation, yet still innately collaborative.

And why should American music be anything else? This was music that was part of the American character. It was the sonic version of Americans' embrace in the civic realm, so amply described by French observer Alexis de Tocqueville, of voluntary associations — not any centrally directed, command-and-control government — to fill social and communal needs. What de Tocqueville described was, indeed, collective and experimental improvisation amid collaborative goals. The jazz of "Mandy" and "Cake Walking Babies" that played from phonographs and on airwaves 100 years ago this month was a perfect encapsulation, and musical expression, of American culture.

So, visitors, don't leave New Orleans this week without listening to some traditional jazz. And whether your team wins or loses, take home an appreciation of jazz's joys.

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Let the show trials begin with abortion laws


Stephanie Grace

Not long after the U.S. Supreme Court stripped away the half-century-old right to abortion and Louisiana swiftly followed up by passing extreme laws to nearly ban the procedure, I asked a New Orleans area OB-GYN I know how things were going.

This doctor said they were mostly calm in major medical centers, where procedures to procure second opinions for miscarriages and problem pregnancies were in place, but more problematic in rural areas with fewer specialists and less legal support — and then sighed and ended our conversation with this: "We're just waiting for the show trials to start."

Well, it looks like the wait is over.

Attorney General Liz Murrill and West Baton Rouge Parish District Attorney Tony Clayton are making a great big show of pursuing charges against New York doctor Margaret Carpenter, who mailed mifepristone tablets used to induce medical abortion to a mother of a minor in Louisiana.

The teenager's mom is charged under a separate law against coercion of an abortion. Due to privacy protections, we don't know all the details other than that the girl took the pills the mother had procured — allegedly under pressure — and wound up in the emergency room, which is certainly a horrible situation.

Murrill, a Republican, and Clayton, a Democrat who is aligned with her and her onetime boss, Gov. Jeff Landry, aren't just prosecuting a pair of cases. They're clearly looking to make an example of this family and this physician, with the apparent aim of putting an even further chill on women's options during extremely difficult and — one would hope — private situations.

Speaking to radio host Jim Engster last month, Clayton called the case "groundbreaking."

And on social media, Murrill puffed her chest at those who are saying they've gone too far. Here's how she responded to New York Attorney General Letitia James, who'd written that "We will not allow people to weaponize the law and undermine our providers' ability to deliver critical care" — and who, not coincidentally, is otherwise best known nationally for securing a civil fraud decision against Donald Trump.

"Respectfully, @NewYorkStateAG, I don't think you should be the one to talk about 'weaponizing the law.' Since when is a coerced abortion health care? It's a crime to force an abortion and conspiring with another to do so makes them a principal."

That, of course, is for the courts to address.

Carpenter is charged under a state law that prohibits the shipment of abortion-inducing drugs that are both legal and commonly used elsewhere than Louisiana.



STAFF FILE PHOTO
Louisiana Attorney General Liz Murrill

And New York has passed a safe haven law for prescribers and vows not to allow extradition.

So lots of legal fighting is coming, and I'll leave that to the lawyers to parse.

But Murrill and Clayton aren't leaving it to their own lawyers, as they would if they looked at this as only a case of alleged lawbreaking.

Instead, they're exploiting a family tragedy to make a point — and to intimidate both doctors and Louisiana women who already have to jump through hoops to control their own reproductive health, a burden that falls disproportionately on those with fewer means.

But then, that's kind of becoming an MO around here.

It's all reminiscent of a law the Louisiana Legislature passed last year that reclassified two drugs used to induce abortion as controlled dangerous substances, making them harder to access even in emergencies where they're used to stop excessive bleeding and essentially hijacking a classification meant to control access to highly addictive drugs, which these are not.

This happened after another tragedy, the attempt in Texas by the former brother-in-law of a Louisiana lawmaker to slip his sister abortion-inducing pills without her knowledge. That's a terrible thing — but it's an individual act that is covered by existing law, not an excuse to make overall access more difficult.

Murrill staunchly defends that law and claims those who raise concerns are playing politics.

Gee, it would sure be a shame if anyone did that with such a sensitive issue, wouldn't it?

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NFL puts an end to 'racism,' focuses on DEI


Will Sutton

The National Football League makes news everywhere it goes, especially during NFL Super Bowl Week. In New Orleans, with the biggest Big Game of the football season featuring the Kansas City Chiefs and the Philadelphia Eagles, the league has weighed in on diversity, equity and inclusion, ticking off and upsetting some, satisfying others and leaving still others wondering where the league stands.

In recent days, the league made news by ending a relatively new, pro-diversity tradition and staying committed to its overarching diversity philosophy.

In summary, the league decided to do away with an anti-racism message, but its actual business practices will stay focused on diversity.

The NFL is a premiere professional business and sports organization. It's hard to argue with its success. With its 32 professional football franchises, including the New Orleans Saints, league revenues in 2023 were more than $20.24 billion. It's a business with lots of eyeballs. Most of the top television broadcasts each year are NFL football games. It has taken the NFL decades to build an audience of more than 100 million viewers for the annual Super Bowl, a business with a predominantly Black on-the-field workforce.

Thousands arrived for The Big Game. They came to see the best of the best compete. Regardless of race, color or creed — or I would like to think so.

George Floyd was murdered while in the custody of Minneapolis police officers in late May 2020 after complaining that he couldn't breathe, crying for his mother while complaining that he was hurting. The incident was videotaped. Floyd, a Black man, was handcuffed, beaten and allowed to die.

Millions of citizens saw what happened, and they knew it was wrong. Corporate citizens like the NFL knew it was wrong. Like so many individual citizens and corporate citizens, the NFL spoke up, said what happened was wrong and did something about it. The league ramped up its 2018 "Inspire Change" initiative, providing leadership with action and words. With a few choice words, the league made it clear where it stood on accepting and appreciating differences, treating others with fairness and strongly suggesting specific actions that could be taken by all who enjoyed the sport.

"Vote." "Stop Hate." "It Takes All of Us." "Choose Love." "End Racism."

It was more than a game. It was a movement. A movement with unifying messages.

Then things started to change.

Some grew tired of hearing about and talking about injustices, unfairness and racism. They knew these things were real. They simply didn't want to deal with them.

As President Donald Trump puts his anti-diversity, anti-DEI stamp on the federal government and pushes businesses everywhere to do the same, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said the league is standing firm as it continues to do the right thing when it comes to diversity. Some Black and more progressive folks were disappointed that the league chose not to display an "End Racism" stencil in the game's end zone. Some White and more conservative fans cheered the move, though the diversity commitment gave them heartburn.

The idea of ending racism should be something that unifies. But it isn't. It's obvious that some people don't want such messages because they think it's cool to be racist — whether they want to admit it or not. In recent days, some are boycotting major brands that have backed off of DEI efforts. Costco has not. Now some are flocking to purchase memberships at a store that hasn't had their business.

Goodell is the league leader, but he reports to 32 bosses, the owners of the professional football franchises. The mostly White, male owners make a lot of money with mostly conservative business practices. Though several contributed to Trump and conservative political causes, they don't want to see their business collapse by losing large parts of their fan base. According to a 2023 survey, 37% of Whites, 42% of Blacks and 45% of Hispanics said they are avid NFL football fans. And at 35%, Black casual fan numbers were higher than White or Hispanic fans.

It's hard to believe sometimes, but pursuing diversity, equity and inclusion is a new idea. For centuries, Black people were enslaved as a part of a legal business and government system that supported forced labor as a part of making big profits. We moved into Reconstruction with some hope. The civil rights era yielded some gains. Some laws and systems were changed and updated to acknowledge how unfair our nation has been to so many.

I'm only one fan, and I've made my choice. Though I'll miss seeing the "End Racism" language on the field, I'll be watching the Super Bowl game, halftime show and commercials, pleased that the NFL is sticking to its commitment to improve the league, the sport and our world when it comes to justice, equity, diversity and inclusion — no matter what it's called.

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