

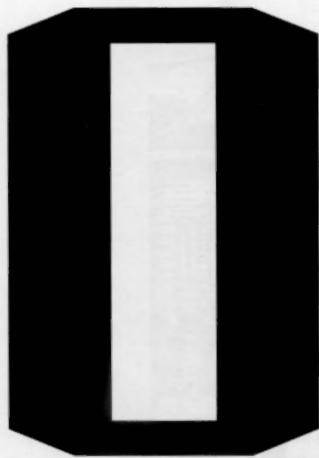




Why Dey Had To Kill Him?

The Life and Death of Shotgun Joe

by Matt Sakakeeny



On the Sunday before Thanksgiving 2011, out by the former site of the Desire Projects in New Orleans's Ninth Ward, the Nine Times Social Aid & Pleasure Club is readying for its annual parade. The neighborhood has shrunk since the demolition of the projects and the breach of the Industrial Canal after Hurricane Katrina, but you wouldn't know by the turnout today. Hundreds are lined up along Louisa Street to

cheer on the members of the Nine Times, former residents of Desire who are escorting us through the Ninth Ward in their purple fedoras, alligator-leather shoes, and velvet sashes embroidered with the phrase WAY DOWNTOWN.

The Stooges Brass Band lead the procession like funky pied pipers; their rhythms set the pace and their improvised horn solos and drum rolls inspire the jumps, drops, and spins from the dancers who crowd around them. The moving block party reaches its peak when the Stooges play their original "Where Ya From?" and the crowd answers back "Waaaaay Downtown!" We are, in fact, way downtown, about five miles from the T-shirt shops of the French Quarter and a world away from the tree-lined streets and stately houses of Uptown where I teach at Tulane University.

Across the train tracks and onto narrow Desire Street, we bunch up together and the Stooges drop the tempo without losing intensity. Bandleader Walter Ramsey sounds out a minor-key riff on the tuba, sending a whoosh through the crowd. Arms reach up towards the sky, hips swerve low. The trumpets spell out a winding melody that, despite our pace, lasts for an entire block, ratcheting up the sense of anticipation. The song is another Stooges original called "Why Dey Had to Kill Him?" and though it has never been commercially released, it is familiar to many at the parade who respond to the Stooges call of "Oh why?" and then shout the refrain in unison:

Why dey had to kill him?

They have the nerve, to say they protect and serve.

Oh why?

Why dey had to kill him?

They need to change their logo, because we don't trust the po-po.

Oh why?

For a moment, this sour notion mingles with the sweet smells of barbecue and weed, but the song doesn't interrupt the party atmosphere so much as thicken it. Walter modulates to major and we sing "We all gonna miss Joseph" over and over, until the next song takes us to another place. Without the benefit of a microphone, Walter can't be heard singing the verses he wrote as a testament to his friend and fellow musician Joseph Williams. Days earlier, when the Stooges played the song at their weekly Thursday-night gig at the Hi-Ho Lounge, those verses were loud and clear. Walter put down his instrument and came to the front of the stage in a frenzied blur of dreadlocks and teeth, rapping playful memories of childhood, then tough-love descriptions of pawning a horn for drug money, and finally a recounting of a police killing:

Years done passed and now the case is on the shelf,
The police they don't investigate they own self....
Thank you for destroying us and killing our folks,
The police and your system is just a joke.

"It's just all my thoughts and my feelings about my friend that I don't have here no more," Walter tells me. "It's nothing fake, just real shit that happened."

Though his name may never appear in the history books on New Orleans music, the story of Joseph Williams—aka Lil' Joe, aka Shotgun Joe—is the stuff of legend among the musicians who knew him. For the rest of us, the question is why this ordinary man is worthy of a song known to those marching, way downtown, at the margins of America?

In a city of musical families, Joe had the distinction of being born into two. His great-grandmother Alice Hill was sister to Jessie Hill, who had an r&b hit in 1960 with "Ooh Poo Pah Doo" and nurtured two of today's biggest names in New Orleans, his grandsons Troy "Trombone Shorty" Andrews and James Andrews. Alice's husband Frank Lastie was a drummer and deacon at the Guiding Star Spiritual Church and five of their seven children—Melvin, David, Walter, Betty, and Devora—grew up playing music in a big two-story house at 1807 Delery Street in the Lower Nine.

"That house was like a breeding ground for musicians," remembers Betty's son Herlin Riley, who has played drums with Ahmad Jamal and Wynton Marsalis. "My uncle Melvin would actually wheel my crib into the rehearsal room to keep me quiet and to hear the music." Melvin had passed away by the time Joe was born in 1982, but his album *That Old Time Religion* was a mainstay on the family turntable. To young Joe's ears, the oddly progressive convergence of jazz trumpet and gospel hymns sounded entirely routine. Betty immersed her grandchildren—Joe, his sisters Unetra and Unell, and half-brother Arian—in the family's musical traditions.

"At one point I was playing for four churches on a Sunday," Betty says of her days as an organist. "I would start early in the morning and wind up in the evening, and I kept the kids right there with me." When Herlin wasn't on the road, he fulfilled the role of musical "unc," singing made-up ditties over breakfast, tapping out rhythms on the kitchen table, giving Joe his first horn, and eventually playing with him at family gatherings.

"Growing up, music was a safe haven for Joseph," remembers Unell. Born into a relatively harmonious environment on Delery Street, it was their father who introduced discord. Long before Joseph Jackson married Unae Williams, he was known around the neighborhood as unbalanced, a "little off," Herlin thought at first. The beatings began after Joseph and Unae settled on the corner of Delery and Law Streets, just a few blocks from the Lastie compound. "She took her kids and she got away from him," Betty says. "She had left and she went to Ohio. Then she came home and before you knew it, she went back to her husband."

On the evening of April 1, 1989, Joseph became upset with his wife for not serving rice with dinner. He marched Lil' Joe, Unetra, Unell, and Arian outside and told them to wait on the corner. He returned to the kitchen and shot Unae dead, then he dropped the children off at his sister's house down the street and walked over the canal bridge to the Fifth District police station to turn himself in. At the trial, the prosecuting attorney requested a witness, and the responsibility fell to Joe. "His daddy was sitting at the defendant's table, and he took the stand as a child at seven years old," Herlin says. "Music, probably, for him, was an outlet. But it's hard to fill the void of missing two parents."

By all accounts, Joe's life from this point forward was defined by a tug-of-war between expression through music and suppression through more damaging means. Joe made it into the marching band at Lawless High School and started his own group with two classmates, drummer Dinerral Shavers and trumpeter Shamarr Allen. The Little Jazzmen debuted at a cousin's wedding, and before long Dinerral and Shamarr were recruited into the fledgling Hot 8 Brass Band, while Joe partnered with another new band, the Stooges, after many sessions of trading riffs with Walter. "Joe would listen to music all day long," Walter says. "And he got that ear. He can hear something and he can play it." But their musical partnership was brief: In 1997 Dinerral and Shamarr recommended Joe for a trombone spot in the Hot 8 and suddenly the band crystallized into a tight-knit unit of musical brothers.

The Hot 8 was the most recent in an unbroken legacy of black brass bands dating back to Emancipation. The bands are a fixture at community parades, like the one sponsored by *Nine Times*, as well as at jazz funerals, burial processions that begin with slow, somber dirges from the church and end with up-tempo, upbeat music after burial. But the Hot 8 followed a trail blazed by the Dirty Dozen and Rebirth Brass Bands in the 1980s and '90s, creating progressive new songs and propelling tradition off the streets and into nightclubs, concert halls, and recording studios. In this new order, sometimes referred to as the Brass Band Renaissance, Lil' Joe earned a reputation as an innovative songwriter and restless improviser, just as he earned the nickname Shotgun Joe by skillfully manipulating the long, barrel-like slide of the trombone.

Joe's composition "Rastafunk" begins with melodic horn lines juxtaposed over a reggae rhythm, followed by a sequence of jazzy solos, before ending with a group chant that is pure hip-hop:

The ghetto!

From the ghetto! [born and raised, probably die right here]

In the ghetto!

I smoke weed, drink that gas

Standing on the corner, how you loving that?

It's all about the hustle.

I smoke weed, drink that gas

Standing on the corner, how you loving that?

It's all about the struggle.

"Rastafunk" is a new-school standard that takes a cue from the uncompromising directness of hip-hop to depict the struggles and the hustles of daily life. In a music scene overflowing with instrumentalists who can play hundreds of traditional songs at a moment's notice, Joe pushed the boundaries of tradition. "Joseph, he was born into that lineage, into that whole environment," says Herlin. "But he being of his own generation, he wanted to create something of his own."

Joe's creativity sprang from his musical family and was nurtured in the streets where he played, but those same streets were a lure for more self-destructive activities. Hot 8 bandleader Bennie Pete recognized the signs of heroin use. "Joe had caught a real bad rap," says Bennie. "Every Mother's Day he always would be sad, but one thing about him—you never had to worry about him hurting anybody because the only person he'll hurt is his self. I mean, he'll go at it with his self." At home, his siblings also took notice.

"Joseph started feeling down and often talked about death and saying he was ready to be with his mother," remembers Unell. Kids teasing Joe made Unetra upset: "When people used to call Joseph a dopehead, I used

from *Requiem*

by Yusef Komunyakaa

Already *The Book of the Dead*
opened as the water rose
to leaf through unbearable dreams
before & after, the benedictions
& prayers, the speaking in tongues
raising with the tide of flotsam
& debris of fallen churches
across the Lower Ninth, a slush
working its way up clapboard
& slave-brick walls of houses
tilted in a dirge, up the last rung
of the ladder, up to the voices
hiding in the attic, & then stopped
in the middle air, & already
stories of a domed purgatory
stumbled out of a wailing
where proxy armies clashed
every weekend, & now the cries
rise from a storm within,
& for a moment, as if we aren't here
we see demons riding the shoulders
of angels in some antiworld
reflecting the streets outside
where thieves of bread & milk
are beaten to the sidewalks,
but we're still here on earth,
& already the boom of the levee
drowns out the eternal solo
of Bolden's cornet driving a note
up the river of rivers, saying,
I'm the mama & papa of ragtime...

to cry because didn't nobody know how he was feeling." To help keep Joe's position in the Hot 8, Walter Ramsey used to get Joe's horn out of pawn before a gig. Reliability is a requirement for gigging musicians, and heroin has a way of making people unreliable, so Bennie was already used to subbing-out the trombone spot when, in May 2004, Joe was jailed on burglary charges. It took a month for the Hot 8 to make Joe's bail and upon his release he headed straight to a parade in the French Quarter.

"He was ready to get back to work," remembers Unetra. Joe quickly resumed a constructive routine of gigging and rehearsals. "He was a new person, always happy," says Unell, but looking back on this brief window in Joe's life, no one can say for sure whether his other routines had also returned.

On the afternoon of August 3, 2004, Joe left Delery Street and drove to the Tremé neighborhood to meet the rest of the band for a jazz funeral. The white Ford F-150 pickup truck that he drove had been reported as stolen. Joe's friends claim the truck was a "crack rental"—a car that changes hands among drug dealers and users—which would explain why Joe had the original keys. However Joe got the truck, while he was parked outside The Food Store, a convenience store in the Tremé, two police cruisers boxed him in and he was ordered out of the car. When Joe moved towards the passenger-side door, officers filled his body with bullets. He was twenty-two years old, unarmed, and, according to self-identified eyewitnesses, had his arms raised upright out of the open passenger-side window. Dinerral, who happened to be training

as a Civil Sheriff's Office deputy at the time, had heard the shooting incident unfold over his walkie-talkie. When he arrived on the scene to find his childhood friend and bandmate had been the victim, he threw his gun belt to the ground and was taken into custody by police. That evening, NOPD Deputy Superintendent Marlon Defillo explained to reporters that Joe had used his truck as a weapon, and made reference to Joe's prior arrest as further justification for the shooting.

All night every night between the killing and the funeral, musicians gathered on Delery Street and paraded around the Ninth Ward to honor Joe in song. Musicians call this kind of warm-up for a proper jazz funeral "bringing him down," and the intention is to create a sound powerful enough to communicate with the dead. It also sent a message to the police, who patrolled the area constantly to ensure that the resentment didn't boil over.

Inside 1807 Delery, the family was reeling from Joe's death. "How do you kill a guy if you tell him to get out the truck and he's on his way out the truck, with a cellphone in one hand, trombone in the other?" wondered Betty. Police classified the shooting as justifiable, there was no departmental investigation, and officers Kevin Scruggs, Jonathan Carroll, and Bruce Little were cleared of any wrongdoing.

On the night of Joe's viewing, the Hot 8 gathered outside Tilly's Funeral Home, talking with Joe's family and friends and waiting to perform. The embalmer at Tilly's had developed a relationship with the Hot 8 through the funeral business, and began describing the amount of work that was necessary to reconstruct Joe. He had been preparing the body since three o'clock that morning, but an open casket was ruled out. He invited them back to the embalming room to see for themselves. Bennie declined. "I ain't really good with holding that all in my stomach," he says. "Even since I was small, when people get killed, everybody go run and see such-and-such, I run the other way because it just stood with

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me, and at night it would come get me. I don't want to see that." Bennie's queasiness was part loss and part anger: the pain of confronting Joe's lifeless body was exacerbated by the events that led to his death. "I was upset he was dead, but I was more upset how he died. It was like he was hunted, man, like he was a deer or something."

Bennie voiced his most explicit response to Joe's death through music. Outside the St. James Methodist Church in the Tremé, Bennie joined dozens of other musicians to honor Joe with a jazz funeral, including Joe's brother Arian, his uncle Herlin, his first bandleader Walter, and his childhood friends Dinerral and Shamarr. "We didn't play no pop tunes, no street tunes," Bennie recalls. "We just played hymns because it was a respect thing for him."

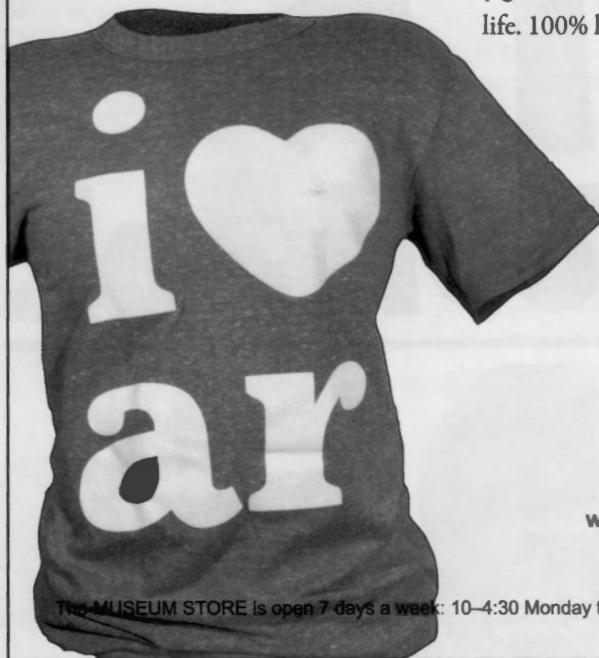
The spirituals played that day, such as "Just a Closer Walk With Thee" and "I'll Fly Away," have articulated messages of salvation since Reconstruction, up through the era of Civil Rights, and on to today. But to properly memorialize Joe, Bennie and the Hot 8 felt they needed to go beyond songs and sentiments of the past. In December 2006 at the House of Blues nightclub, the Hot 8 appeared onstage in matching baggy jeans and oversized T-shirts, looking and sounding like a hip-hop collective with wind instruments and marching drums instead of turntables and samplers. Trumpeter and singer Big Al Huntley introduced the song "You Bang, We Bang Bang" in honor of Joe, instructing the crowd, "When we say, 'You bang, we bang bang,' everybody feel that to your heart. I need everybody to sing it right now with me one time."

You bang, we bang bang
 You bang, we bang bang
 You bang, we bang bang
 Why'd they have to kill Lil' Joe?
 They gone and killed Joe
 Carroll, Scruggs, and Little
 Ray Nagin let it go.
 Why'd they have to kill Lil' Joe?

Even though two years had passed since Joe's killing, the response at the House of Blues was immediate and intense. Prompted by Shamarr and Dinerral, the crowd sang along, shouting, making vocal imitations of police sirens, and pumping fists in the air. A man in the audience held up a black T-shirt with the question, WHY DEY HAD TO KILL HIM? printed in white letters across the front. Shamarr gestured for the man to throw the shirt onstage, then held it up for the audience to see as the song ended with a

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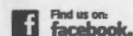



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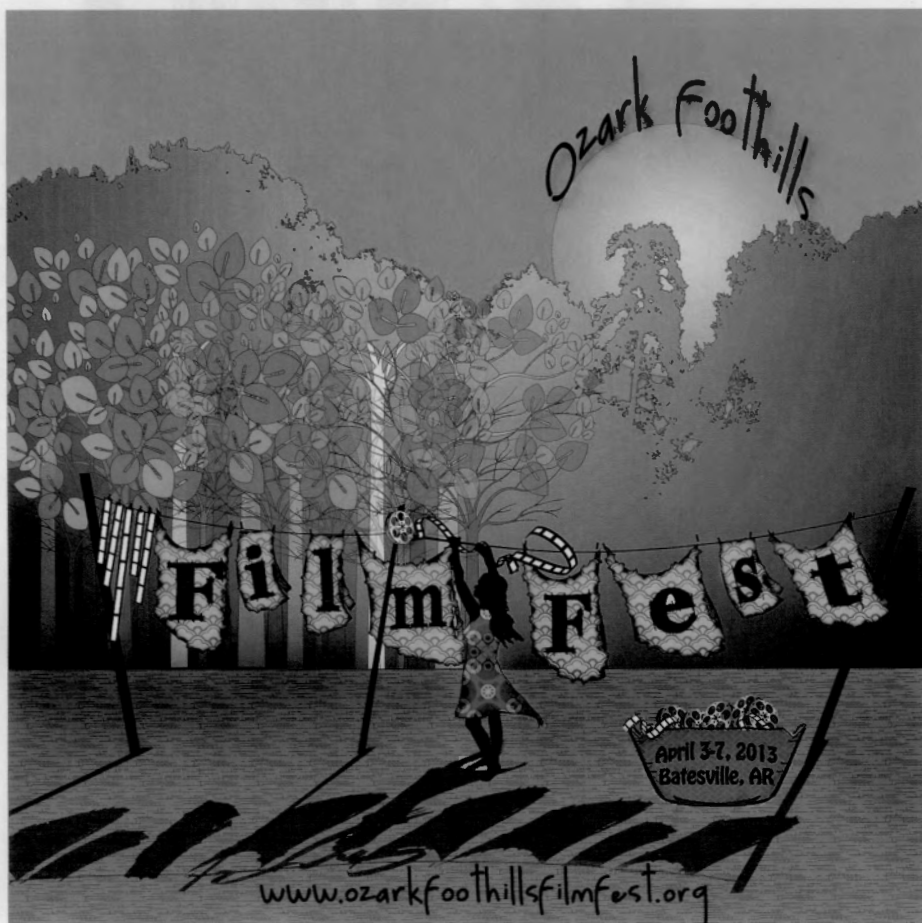
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collision of horns, cymbals, and applause.

"You Bang, We Bang Bang," like "Rastafunk" and "Why Dey Had to Kill Him," is a firsthand account of the precariousness of being young and black in the inner city. For generations, spirituals offered messages of deliverance from overt racism. Today, patterns of inequality are more

submerged, exposed in exceptional moments such as a police killing or a devastating hurricane, and the hip-hop generation has responded with unflinching depictions of these harsh realities. Though the circumstance of Joe's death was extreme, his life was distressingly unremarkable. As it stands, Joe was only one of four members of the Hot 8 to die in his

twenties. In 1996, trumpeter Jacob Johnson, twenty-one, was robbed and murdered in his apartment in the Calliope Projects. In 2004, trombonist Demond Dorsey, twenty-eight, died of a heart attack, possibly drug-induced. And on December 28, 2006, just a few weeks after that House of Blues concert, Dinerral Shavers, twenty-five, was murdered, taking a bullet apparently intended for his stepson Thaddeus.

Dinerral's killing helped ignite public backlash as community members converged on City Hall by the thousands to protest the ineffectiveness of local officials in stemming violence. Walking in silence, with none of the festivity of a brass-band parade, messages were conveyed on signs rather than through song. Above the heads of the Hot 8 bounced a sign: VIOLENT SYSTEMS CREATE VIOLENT PEOPLE. Way in the back was another sign with a picture of a young man holding a trombone and the words, RIP JOSEPH.

A recent investigation by the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice found that the New Orleans Police Department "has engaged in patterns of misconduct that violate the Constitution and federal law," and the department has entered into a consent decree designed to "fundamentally change the culture of the NOPD." If that is encouraging, so, too, are the signs of life out in the Ninth Ward, where some members of the Nine Times have returned to blocks peppered with rebuilt homes.

But all remains quiet at 1807 Delery: After the Lastie house was destroyed in Katrina, Betty and her grandchildren moved farther out, to New Orleans East. Herlin also lives in the East and the family can still be heard making music together. Their story is a reminder that submerged under every sublime street beat, below every trumpet pointed to the heavens, is the sound of a mournful dirge. ♫

R.I.P. SHOTGUN JOE



1982 - 2004