

Music in the Margins of America: Black Marching Bands in Post-Katrina New Orleans

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From the perspective of those in the United States, displacement is often imagined as a problem for others, happening elsewhere. This most powerful and wealthiest of nations has for a century or more represented the pinnacle of global stability and security. But the ongoing debate about immigration to the US, reaching fever pitch under the leadership of President Trump, is one indication that displacement has been central to American identity. The country was founded on displacement, voluntary and forced, and from its earliest days there has been disagreement over who belongs and what paths to citizenship are available to them. The problem of displacement is not confined to those relocating to the US but also marks those within the nation who have not been granted the full rights of citizenship. Undocumented immigrants, Native Americans, and black Americans are among those who have faced internal displacement, with differing experiences of forced relocation as well as metaphorical abandonment to the margins of American society.

The most visible example of internal displacement in recent US history is Hurricane Katrina, which struck the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005, and wreaked particular havoc on the lives of black New Orleanians. When the levees broke, floodwaters blanketed the cityscape and paradoxically uncovered the nation's open secret: that to be black in America is to live with the eternal threat of risk and insecurity. Multiple cases of innocent black residents killed or injured by gunfire, by both police and civilians, came to light after the floodwaters receded ("Law and Order," n.d.; Solnit, 2007). Meanwhile, viral reports from the front lines—of hundreds of armed gang members, of children and even babies being raped, of murder victims stacked in piles in the Superdome—all turned out to be unfounded (Thevenot & Russell, 2005). In temporary shelters set up throughout the South, evacuees were repeatedly referred to as "refugees," as if they had been displaced from another nation. There was a Katrina "diaspora" to every part of the country—concentrated in Houston, Dallas, Atlanta, and other southern cities—and an estimated 100,000 people of color never returned (Bliss, 2015).

In a critical study of race and racism in New Orleans, Clyde Woods situated Katrina within an unbroken history of “planned abandonment” (Woods, 2017). So while physical displacement due to a singular catastrophe was highly visible, other patterns of social dislocation have been more submerged, pervasive, and persistent. Take public education. Starting in 1960, school desegregation caused a massive “white flight” of families to suburban areas, leaving behind a chronically underfunded and mismanaged system. New Orleans was effectively re-segregated into what education activist Jonathan Kozol calls “apartheid schools” (Kozol, 2005, p. 19). Before Katrina, the city’s public school population was 94% African American, far less than the overall African American population of 66%. Seventy-three percent of students qualified for the free and reduced lunch program (Perry et al., 2015). There was a robust teachers’ union, made up primarily of black New Orleanians, but they were not empowered to redress the administrative neglect that trickled down to their classrooms. The district ranked among the lowest in the state in test scores and graduation rates, which state politicians used as ammunition to justify the most sweeping educational “reforms” in the country.

In November 2005, while over 90% of New Orleanians were still living in exile, the Louisiana State Legislature passed Act 35, firing 7,000 veteran teachers, dissolving the regional school district, and replacing it with an “all-choice” system of independently operated charter schools. The rates of uncertified teachers, Teach for America recruits, and other transplants rose to dramatic heights. School names with deep attachments for generations of New Orleanians were changed. Frederick Douglass became KIPP Renaissance. John McDonogh is now Bricolage Academy. Neighborhood schools became a relic of the past because parents enroll in a citywide lottery and their child is assigned a school regardless of proximity to home. Oversight is divided up among clusters of independent Charter Management Organizations like KIPP, Choice Foundation, or Inspire NOLA. Student experience varies widely across what critics have referred to as a “non-system.” Kids bounce between schools. Teachers come and go. Underperforming schools close. Inconsistency has become the new normal.

In this shifting landscape, one social and cultural anchor that has remained is marching band. Throughout the Southeastern US, in highly segregated school systems, black marching bands have flourished since the mid-twentieth century. Generations of New Orleans jazz, blues, soul, and funk musicians got their start in band. The city is in the middle of a “marching band belt” that stretches from Florida to Texas, where middle schools serve as “feeder schools” for high schools, and high school as a training ground for Historically Black

Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) such as Southern University, Grambling State University, and Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU). In New Orleans, football games are overshadowed by halftime shows and drum majors receive more notoriety than quarterbacks. Post-Katrina, the return of band signaled the possibility of coming home and reestablishing social and familial ties to place. In a crisis of upheaval, students, parents, and alumni demanded that this culturally relevant tradition be included in the radically altered system of education. This very specific cultural practice, in a particular place, at a precise historical moment, tells a larger story about the intersection of race and displacement, music and education, in the US.

The significance of band was made evident just months after the storm, when mayor Ray Nagin decided to go forward with the city's annual Mardi Gras festivities even though New Orleans remained virtually uninhabited. The Mardi Gras organizations that sponsor the parades, known as "Krewes," faced many obstacles to mounting a successful season. Krewe members were displaced around the country, the massive floats that carry them were destroyed by flood waters, and there was no guarantee that spectators would travel to New Orleans to marvel at their costumes and beg for their beads. Another problem loomed: only a handful of schools had reopened, which meant there were no marching bands to fill the stately boulevards of St. Charles Avenue and Canal Street with sound.

For many parade-goers, school marching bands are the highlight of the Mardi Gras season, the two weeks leading up to Mardi Gras day when there is at least one parade per night and at least ten bands in each parade. The most impressive bands stretch for a full block, with the color guard, drum majors and majorettes, flag team, and cheerleaders, followed by the musicians (trombones, mellophones, trumpets, woodwinds, tubas, and drums), and finally the dance team marching under the streetlights. Without the bands, one music educator joked, a Mardi Gras parade was "all floats, dune buggies, and cotton-candy vendors." For this Mardi Gras, Krewes had to scramble to find bands at schools unaffected by the storm, and ultimately a composite band was formed with students from three Catholic schools with predominantly black students: St. Mary's Academy, Xavier University Preparatory School, and St. Augustine High School. The Max Band, as they were called, marched in all the parades and quickly became a symbol of recovery on the local news and in multiple articles in the *Times-Picayune* newspaper. For many spectators, including myself and a few friends attending a parade a few nights before Mardi Gras, just seeing and hearing the bands pass us by was enough to bring tears to our eyes.

I moved to New Orleans in 1997, having trained at Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore as a guitarist and audio engineer. As a producer for the public

radio program *American Routes* I became immersed in the local traditions of the jazz funeral and the second line parade, musical processions that wound through the city streets. I moved to New York in 2003 to enter the PhD program in ethnomusicology at Columbia University, returning to New Orleans in 2006 to research the brass bands that provided the music for funerals and parades. These ensembles of eight to twelve instrumentalists operated with an entirely different set of principles than the musical styles I had studied in conservatory. Methods of improvisation were valued over composition; audience participation was expected through dance and other forms of bodily engagement; songs were generally learned by ear rather than from musical notation.

It's not as though I was unfamiliar with these approaches to music-making. Like most Americans I grew up surrounded by black popular music. In graduate school, I read studies of black musicians' socialization into culturally-specific musical practices. What did surprise me, and what was largely missing from popular and scholarly discourses of black popular music, was the role of formal education in the development of performing artists. When I spoke with brass band musicians nearly all of them told me their first encounter with an instrument was in school, specifically in marching band.

The depth of significance of band was evident at an event I organized in Fall 2007 called "Brass Band Music Across the Generations." I had invited members of the world-renowned Rebirth Brass Band to introduce students from John McDonogh, Joseph S. Clark, and St. Augustine high schools to brass band performance practices. The excitement in the room was palpable. Here was a group of adults who had gotten their start in schools much like the kids were now attending, playing the same kind of music they were now studying, and had gone on to receive international adulation. The familiar sounds of brass band music provided everyone in the room with a sense of rootedness in place and the possibility of continuity after the displacement caused by the flood two years earlier. The night ended with dozens of musicians young and old playing through Rebirth's most popular song "Do Whatcha Wanna" in a joyous clash of brass and drums.

On my way out, Rebirth drummer Derrick Tabb approached me about a music education program that he was trying to launch. Derrick had been a member of the celebrated Andrew J. Bell Junior High School marching band in the late 1980s. He had begun experimenting with drugs when band director Donald Richardson intervened and helped redirect him toward a career in music. In the 1990s, after Derrick graduated, budget cuts in arts education had eliminated many middle school band programs, including Bell. The restructuring of the school system after Katrina hit exacerbated an already deteriorating situation. In the changeover, high school bands would return while only one or

two middle schools would offer band. Derrick handed me a proposal outlining the social, educational, and economic benefits of band and asked for help in securing donations to implement a program for middle-school students. His program would teach kids ages nine to fourteen the fundamentals of music and marching, preparing them for high school and offering a safe and productive afterschool environment.

On May 22, 2008, Roots of Music launched with Derrick, Lawrence Rawlins, Allen Dejan, Shoan Ruffin, and Edward Lee teaching about 40 kids the fundamentals of music. Our talks with the school district had gone nowhere but Tipitina's offered up their nightclub as a rehearsal space, so every weekday, all summer long, the teachers and students piled into the hot, dark, musty bar, beaming with enthusiastic smiles. I was able to get a few instruments and some money donated. In these negotiations, I learned that many granting institutions would only place instruments in pre-existing schools or support programs run by teachers during normal school hours. "They never received a situation like this" Derrick observed of the new education landscape. In an "all-choice" network of charter schools, not all principals and administrators saw the value of arts education. Schools are assessed solely on standardized test scores and the arts are not tested. Students of color in urban charter schools have been relegated to the margins of American educational policy.

But as Derrick's example shows, there are tangible social and cultural benefits to participating in the arts and band directors have potential to influence the lives of young people. I was initially drawn to marching band as pre-professional training for musicians in New Orleans but when I began attending rehearsals I was made aware of what participation offers all students, whether or not they wind up pursuing a career in music. In the band room, every child is taught aesthetic expression through performance, social bonding through ensemble teamwork, the discipline necessary for group collaboration, and the long-term payoffs of practice. My own awakening to these lessons came about as I witnessed two neighbors join Roots of Music and then follow very different life paths that were both fulfilling, in part, because of their formative experiences there.

Reginald and Jaron Williams were looking for something, anything, to do that summer. While many residents remained displaced and much of the city was still rebuilding, there were few programs for kids. The brothers were first in line on the day Roots of Music opened. Reginald, like a lot of big kids, wound up on the tuba, while Jaron, younger and more compact, went for the trumpet. As students and teachers unpacked the shiny new horns, I was taking photographs to send back to the donors in hopes of getting more instruments, and I snapped a picture of Reginald cradling a tuba for the first time, fingering the valves and

adjusting the mouthpiece, a look of wonder in his eyes. Before Katrina, Jaron had played cornerback in an afterschool football league, and he liked the competition but sports never gave the sensation that music did. "It just sends chills through your body," he told me later. Each afternoon, Jaron would head to the upper brass sectional led by Lawrence Rawlins while Reginald studied lower brass with Edward Lee. After a break for dinner, rehearsal would end with the whole band bringing their parts together and learning to step in time.

One evening I saw Reginald standing and waiting in the rain so with Derrick's permission I offered him a ride. At first he politely declined, saying he was waiting for his brother to finish practicing, but then Jaron appeared, trumpet case in hand, and we all climbed into the car. I asked where I should take them and we were surprised to find that we lived a few blocks from each other. Their grandfather Rowan Williams Jr. owned a modest home in the Uptown district that had been spared the worst of the flooding, and they stayed there with younger brother Derrick and mother Melody. The oldest, Darrell, had died at 19 years old after being shot in broad daylight the previous summer. Melody went looking for a safe place for her younger sons to spend their out-of-school time and heard about Roots of Music through a family friend. The brothers were so eager for the program to kick off that Derrick Tabb would sometimes stop by the house and direct them to practice marching around the block. On opening day Reginald and Jaron were first in line.

Once he was up and running, Jaron immersed himself in music. I could hear him practicing his scales day and night down the street. Lawrence noticed his talent right away: "I said, 'Nobody has a sound like this boy.' The tone was just there. I said, 'Man he's going to be off the chain [fantastic].'" One afternoon an older student was leading the trumpeters through warm-up exercises when Lawrence came up from behind. Jaron tells me: "He heard me playing, and he said, 'Bear, that was you?'" Jaron is known to all by the nickname Bear. "He said, 'Play that again.' I played it for him again. And he asked the guys on first trumpet to play it and they couldn't play it so he put me on first trumpet and one of them on second."

Roots of Music became a gateway for Bear to channel his competitiveness along with that creative energy he first felt playing music. "Before I did music I wasn't really doing anything," he says. "I had started being bad in school." Katrina sent the family to Texas and when they returned home the football league was in disarray and there were few other activities to take up. Darrell had been his closest friend and the loss sent him adrift in fourth grade. "You go in class, you're not really feeling anything. You don't want to be there, so you're not doing anything. You're just sitting there." Playing with Roots of Music that summer helped him reset his equilibrium. "I believe if you have something

that you want to get good at in your life, if you do good at that then you're going to start doing good at everything else." Music helped Bear navigate the many challenges he faced.

Bear's older brother Reginald goes by the nickname Diggy (see Figure 13.1). He's less interested in competition than socializing and collaborating with family and friends. When Diggy introduces me to people he says, "that's my partner, Mr. Matt," and everyone he likes becomes his partner. He values those relationships and the moments of sociability and intimacy they come with over excelling in narrowly focused tasks. He switched to trombone after starting out on tuba, and while he came to rehearsal every day and practiced at home most days he was not particularly interested in mastery of technique. For Diggy, band was an opportunity to take up an activity he enjoyed more than school, to strengthen relationships with peers, and to perform in front of an audience. Unlike Bear, he was more concerned with being connected with others than being the best.



FIGURE 13.1 Members of the roots of music in the author's yard, including Reginald "Diggy" Williams (far left) and Jaron "Bear" Williams (to right of Reginald), 2009.
PHOTOGRAPH: MATT SAKAKEENY

A musical ensemble is at once a hierarchy that rewards leadership while also a collaborative endeavor that requires teamwork. Participation differs markedly from core curriculum subjects that stress individual expertise and measurable outcomes. In the model classroom, the dialectic is one between individual autonomy (of the student) and sovereign authority (of the teacher). As Paul Willis has argued, arts education in the US traditionally extends

Eurocentric values as it “connives to keep alive the myth of the special, creative individual” (Willis, 1990, p. 1). Band, like orchestra and chorus, is an inherently participatory art form in which members must abandon attachments to full autonomy and individual expertise for the sake of collaboration. Sovereignty is largely maintained, through the figure of the conductor or director, but they reign over a more dispersed hierarchy that might include assistant directors, section leaders, first and second “chairs,” and all others. The dialectic in participatory arts is one between competition and peer-to-peer learning, individual development, and social bonding.

In an ethnographic study of George Washington High School in Chicago, Carlos Abril analyzes several factors that contribute to students’ experiences with band. As a creative activity, music-making cultivates emotional awareness and facilitates a degree of individual expression within the limits of the ensemble, and the shared time and interests allow for the formation of social bonds. The participatory experience of the ensemble is derived from specific musical practices that alert individuals to their role within the larger collective. Moving together in rhythm creates an experience of group solidarity through embodied and temporal synchronization. The ensemble brings together distinct sections—upper brass, lower brass, woodwinds, and percussion—that rehearse separately, and provide opportunities for the cultivation of leadership roles within each section (Abril, 2012). Peer socialization, leadership cultivation, and social bonding and bridging are inherent to band instruction regardless of students’ particular social identities or life experiences.

In predominantly white institutions, or racially diverse schools like George Washington, members often constitute a unique social structure, a subculture of so-called “band geeks” that is distinct from the larger school culture and other subcultures. This contrasts with the status of students of color in schools located in the marching band belt. These “show-style” marching bands, now highly imitated at historically white colleges, were pioneered by legendary band director William Foster, who led the FAMU band from 1946 to 1998. It was Foster who developed the marching band into a black music ensemble, writing band arrangements of popular songs and introducing dance routines into the drill maneuvers, such as “barrel turns, backbends, hitchkicks, swivel turns, pelvic thrusts, [and] pelvic rotations” (Malone, 1990, pp. 1–2). The drum section plays syncopated rhythms and stacks parts into dense layers of polyrhythm. The winds produce a loud, strident tone, and pile on multiple melodies into rich polyphonic textures. These musical practices expand the collaborative elements of any marching band while fortifying the specific cultural relevance of black music (Sakakeeny, 2015). In New Orleans charter schools, being part

of a collective based around the musical inheritance of black people amplifies the shared sense of belonging that is inherent to band.

Band takes on added local significance through the spectacle of Mardi Gras. From the first day of rehearsal at Roots of Music up through the Mardi Gras parade season in February 2009, the excitement of growing the program was compounded by the rush leading up to their official debut on the streets. Word of mouth and a few local media stories had drawn attention to the band, named the Crusaders, and their ranks had swelled to over 100 members. As the organization scrambled to setup its 501(c)3 status, there was a relentless hustle to get teachers paid, expenses for busing and meals covered, and instruments donated. Lawrence, Derrick, and his wife Keisha cobbled together the Crusaders' uniforms, stitching patches with the Roots of Music logo on used jackets (see Figure 13.2). They collected parts discarded by other bands, like the "spats" worn over boots to protect from mud, and spray-painting them to match the black and gold color scheme. Without a permanent facility, the band had relocated four times but Mardi Gras gave everyone an incentive to keep moving forward.



FIGURE 13.2 The Roots of Music, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2009.

PHOTOGRAPH: MATT SAKAKEENY

Nerves were running high when we loaded into yellow school buses and headed to the first parade. Jaron wondered aloud if he had the endurance to walk six miles in the cold and blow his horn for hours without a break. Derrick

and Lawrence, who had marched in hundreds of parades since entering junior high in the 1980s, were nonetheless anxious to see the public's reaction to the new band they had built up from nothing. The buses dropped us on a side street where the bands waited for their cue to join the parade, one by one, in between the floats carrying Krewe members dressed in gaudy costumes. The Crusaders watched wide-eyed as high school bands faced off against each other, trading songs to see who sounded fullest, ramping up the spirit of competition. A procession of band directors came over to congratulate Derrick and Lawrence and admire the uniforms and shiny gold helmets. The buzz in the air that accompanies any Mardi Gras parade was amplified by the arrival of a band of young upstarts. A space between floats opened up and it was our turn to go.

"Band!" Derrick called out. "Hey!" they shouted in response. "We ready?" "Born ready!" The drum major gave four chirps of his whistle, the entire band counted "1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8" in tempo, and the drummers started their cadence on the downbeat. Marching off the median and into the street, the Crusaders got in formation, five astride, in straight lines, high stepping to the beat. The wind players pumped their forearms in alternation, cradling their instruments, then lifting them to play. The blast of sound was met with cheers and squeals of excitement from the crowds lined up along each side of Napoleon Avenue. Derrick and Lawrence were in the lead in their black suits, followed by the auxiliary team carrying the banner, then the drum major moving his baton in time with the instrumentalists lined up behind him: trombones, baritones, mellophones, trumpets, clarinets, saxophones, flutes, sousaphones, cymbals, snare drums, and bass drums. As I kept apace along the side with some parent volunteers, curious spectators kept stopping us to ask who we were, and we handed them a flyer and kept marching.

Jaron, who had been named co-section leader, marched at the end of the first trumpet row, signaling the start of each song with his hand in the air. Reginald was several rows back where the sousaphones peaked up above everyone's heads, the shiny brass reflecting off the street lights. When we reached the spot along St. Charles Avenue parallel to grandpa Rowan's house, the whole Williams clan was there, screaming and waving, and Melody came over to hug her sons. All along the parade route, as we wound toward the downtown tourist district, I could hear occasional shouts of "Diggy!" and "Bear!" from friends and classmates. We passed the mayor's viewing stand, turned onto Canal Street along the edge of the French Quarter, and finally finished at the convention center where the buses were waiting. As we drove off, the staff congratulated each other while the kids recounted musical highlights and traded stories of their encounters along the way. Just eight months earlier, at the start of the program, no one could have imagined a stronger debut.

My experience volunteering with Roots of Music, learning from teachers and students, transformed my life and work. I not only realized that formal education is an underappreciated aspect of musical socialization in the lives of black New Orleanians but that culturally relevant pedagogy is critical to making music education accessible and inclusive. I came to see the possibility of arts education as a form of social justice, leading me to seek out progressive education researchers who have been arguing this for decades (Hess, 2018). When I started teaching at Tulane University, I set up a service learning class for Tulane students to tutor Roots students. I am currently collaborating with Roots to write a book about the musical and social benefits of participation in bands.

Since 2008 Roots of Music has become a critical institution for arts education in New Orleans, directly impacting the lives of hundreds of middle school kids and seeding talent for dozens of high school bands. Reginald “Diggy” Williams went on to O. Perry Walker High School, where Lawrence’s brother Wilbert Rawlins directs the most celebrated band of the post-Katrina era. Diggy continued on the trombone and enrolled in Southern University, but he couldn’t afford tuition and had to return to New Orleans. He took a job at a restaurant, working his way up from dishwasher to line cook to sous chef. Diggy is a dependable team member with the kitchen staff, reliably doing his part, collaborating with others, a quality that was fortified in band. The death of his older brother saddled him with the responsibility of being “the man of the house,” as Bear describes him, and he stepped up. “He’s my number one supporter, I could tell you that,” says Bear. Diggy, now 25, is the father of a son, Royal, and picks up his trombone only occasionally.

By the time Bear followed his brother to high school, Walker had merged with another school to become Landry-Walker College and Career Preparatory High School. There, under Wilbert Rawlins’ guidance, Bear rose up to become section leader by his junior year. The brothers were featured in the documentary *The Whole Gritty City* (2016), and Bear was chosen as a featured charter in the HBO series *Treme*. Now in his twenties, standing over six feet tall, Bear is section leader at Southern University, consistently ranked the top HBCU band by ESPN and the NCAA. “The story was supposed to happen that way,” says Lawrence, who beams with pride as he shows me pictures of Bear in uniform before a Southern football game. Starting with those earliest rehearsals in the dimly lit Tipitina’s nightclub, Lawrence, Derrick, and the other teachers at Roots of Music cultivated the potential for students like Bear to excel in music.

With every passing year since Katrina, more charter schools have integrated band into their elementary and middle schools, partly as a recruitment tool to

entice parents to enroll their children. Students who have received this training go on to high schools like Landry-Walker with higher performance scores and a stronger investment in band. But at less desirable high schools, like McDonogh 35 where Lawrence teaches, band directors face many obstacles in recruiting top students. An all-choice system is essentially a market-based system with winners and losers. Once a public right for all, arts education has become a privilege for those who wind up in schools that see value in it.

This “access gap” is one of many examples of planned abandonment that Clyde Woods argues has maintained inequality along the lines of race and class. He cites local business entrepreneurs who saw a silver-lining in the mandatory evacuation of black New Orleanians, in the shuttering of public housing projects to stem the return of the poor, and in the forced transformation of public schools into an education marketplace. Within an all-choice charter network, the fate of arts education and culturally relevant pedagogy is in the hands of stakeholders with very different assessments of value. Band has survived in the education marketplace because students and parents demand it, and this demand gives some administrators an incentive to invest in arts education. Whether or not charter schools see the educational value, some have recognized the financial value of attracting students and their state vouchers, currently \$5,441 per pupil (Charter Per Pupil).¹

In an interim period during the tumultuous decade after Katrina, an opportunity of sorts was created for Roots of Music to emerge as an out-of-school program to address an access gap in middle school marching band. The sights and sounds of the band provided New Orleanians returning home with a shared sense of belonging, and in the everchanging education landscape Roots of Music continues to provide young people with a safe and nurturing environment to learn the fundamentals of music. The life experiences of two “graduates,” Reginald and Jaron Williams, demonstrate the significance of the program in training a new generation of professional musicians and instilling in everyone the importance of creativity and collaboration, practice and discipline. The unprecedented event of Katrina, and the aftermath of the flood in a unique city, nonetheless offer broader insight into the role of music education for the displaced.

Note

- 1 “Charter Per Pupil Amounts,” <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/funding/charter-per-pupil-funding>

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