A weekend with Jessica Lehmann in New Orleans

The French Quarter is an area 13 short blocks by 6 with narrow streets and innumerable bars, eateries, souvenir shops, antique shops, and some jazz venues. At this time of the year it is full of tourists many of whom walk around drinking beer from plastic beakers. The staff in restaurants and bars are predominantly if not overwhelmingly white even though 65% of the New Orleans population is black. I am sadly hyperaware of such differences.

It is a joy to listen to what I think of as real jazz – which other people probably think of as traditional, boring and above all easy to listen to. Jazz has for long, maybe for ever, been more of a minority taste than classical music, let alone of course the myriad of varieties of pop. But the enjoyment is really quite different with a bit of audience participation and banter between performers and listeners. We heard *Kermit Ruffins* at the *Little Gem* salon, in a quintet including a Japanese pianist and a female Japanese trombonist who had studied classical music in Tokyo and played brilliantly. Her name is *Haruka Kikuchi* and the pianist is *Yoshitaka “z2” Tsuji* (this is correct because Haruka wrote it for me on my iPhone). Kermit has had an establishment of his own in New Orleans but it seems to have closed.

We also heard a quartet at the age-old Preservation Hall, which is not really a hall at all but a room built of wood accommodating some 60 people and. Here again the jazz is traditional, the words beautifully wrapped around the tunes, and my body moves with the lilt. Two nights later we went to newly fashionable Frenchmen Street where the music is much more raucous, more like rock, and although I appreciate the energy and the élan, the words are incomprehensible and the noise defeats me.

In Frenchmen Street, compared with the Quarter, the public is younger, and seem to include more locals. You can go into a bar/venue and hang around, dance or perform dance-like motions, and maybe have a drink. There is more live music here than in the Quarter itself, and that, after all, is what one comes for.

*Eating*

Eating in the Quarter revolves around fish and beignets – eaten separately. The beignets are nothing but doughnuts in a batter sprinkled with icing sugar, but still shockingly addictive, There must be a secret to the batter. The Café du Monde serves no other food and has innumerable staff racing around the tables. They must get very bored.

Beyond the Quarter we explored other places. The famous Columns Hotel is on a long wide street of no particular interest save for the picturesque tram which tootles along at a leisurely pace with its ill-assorted cargo of tourists and lower class locals. The hotel attracts large numbers in search of a drink – as if there was not enough booze available in the Quarter. But somehow tourists think it is relaxing and chill-out friendly to sit among its columns and imbibe. It also offers an abundant cheese platter.

The columns motif is ubiquitous in high class and middle and upper middle class neighbourhoods. Houses are very often, if not usually, built on piles so that the ‘ground floor’ (first floor in the US) is raised. This practice goes back a long way: it keeps the ground floor above the flooding (usually) and also economizes on laying foundations. Thus the steps leading up to the first floor entrance in the middle of the frontage are both a utilitarian and an aesthetic device contributing to the classical symmetric effect and also to the three-dimensional frontage which is makes even a small building look a little grandiose. Land seems so abundant or relatively cheap in this city that even the humblest dwellings are surrounded by open space.

*Ghoulish post-Katrina tourism*

Inevitably, we indulged in some ghoulish sociological tourism by discovering the effects and legacy of Hurricane Katrina which hit New Orleans in August 2005, by going on a Katrina Tour, arranged daily by a touring company, Grays. You book online and at 1 p.m. get into a small bus fully booked with about 20 tourists. It reminds me of Rio’s popular ‘Favela Tours’. We were incredibly lucky with our guide – a woman on a mission, aged 60-plus with strong liberal convictions and an exhaustive knowledge of the city and its social and environmental problems, who has meticulously prepared the three-and-a-half-hour tour. No one was bored. Her uninterrupted and unhesitating commentary is punctuated with telling details, like the number 7,000 referring to the prisoners in the penitentiary who had to be rescued and the complications or even absence of land titling in low-income areas.

Our guide explains that some areas of the city were vulnerable to the flooding which came in from the inland Lake Pontchartrain, because of the failure to take decisions over decades to strengthen the protective levees, but also because of erosion in the wake of the exist of onshore drilling platforms. The state imposed very low charges on oil companies to repair the damage they left in their wake when they ceased onshore operations next o the city, (she compares the infinitely tougher treatment they get in Texas), and the erosion of the infinity of small islands in the delta is exposing the city to ever greater threats from eventual repeats. Even so a lot of work is going on to shore up the defences, reminiscent in some places of the Thames barrier in London. The Quarter had been built by the French colonial authorities on higher land and was not affected directly.

The bus driver expertly navigates round and round an infinity of square blocks and their uniform streets, and gradually a picture emerges of the city beyond the Quarter, the standard downtown skyscrapers and the vintage districts with the variously proud and humble colonnades and verandas. The streets in these neighbourhoods are deserted: cars are parked in driveways but there is nobody on the street. Once one realizes this it becomes quite eery, but you can understand why: there are very few of the little concentrations of shopping and eating establishments which in old-style cities serve localities and liven up street crossings enabling people to their chopping and gossiping by foot. We barely even saw any supermarkets. There is no reason to go out on the street – there were not even the runners and dog-walkers we saw more often elsewhere. The difference between neighbourhoods is evidenced in the size of houses and their precincts and in their minimal frontage with just a few bare steps. MThere are also vintage low-income areas where many dwellings are known as ‘[shotgun’ homes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shotgun_house#mediaviewer/File:BayouStJohnHeartMarkTires.jpg), narrow houses set on stone or wooden piling or with a single corridor from front to back, built single or double barrelled and enlivened by their owners’ multi-coloured tastes in external decoration. As the socio-economic level declines so sidewalks disappear and the roads become more precarious, but the entrance stair and veranda are still there.

And so we come to the famous 9th Ward which was the worst affected area of the city. Nine years later reconstruction of the old dwellings is clearly in evidence but there are also many empty lots, where wrecked houses have been cleared and the owners are absent (or maybe worse…), overrun with weeds, leaving rats and racoons and snakes to multiply. Our guide tells of various rebuilding schemes to support owners, but also of contractor corruption. The roadways here are slightly more alive with people, but only slightly. The best known scheme is associated with Brad Pitt who has sponsored green architecture which uses scarcely any non-renewable energy. The principles sound simple, and include sun-powered panels on the roof and capture of rainwater. Pitt and Angelina Jolie have a house in the Quarter which they are said to occasionally visit.

We pass a house owned by the celebrated musician Fats Domino, which is embedded in one of these working class neighbourhoods and serves as the headquarters of a business managing his recordings.

We are told that the school system has received abundant attention since Katrina and we see some new and some refurbished buildings. Much of the restoration has been to charter schools – something like the UK’s academies: private, for-profit, but non-fee-paying (presumably). One of these is an initiative by schoolteachers whose school had been closed down, causing much inconvenience to the local population – so the teachers banded together and bid successfully to open a school in the original building. I do not know if this is a for-profit or non-profit venture.

Our guide uses the unusual American term ‘working class’ to describe some of these neighbourhoods, by which she means stable, home-owning and mixed race.

One sad but telling angle refers to the massive overhead inter-state freeway built in the 1950s, which cut through some neighbourhoods and wrecked their collective existence. Such things would not be allowed today and there are vague plans to rebuild it elsewhere.

*High Culture*

The New Orleans Art Gallery lifts you into high culture and offers a course in the history of European Art since the 18th century, crossing the Atlantic for Warhol, Rauschenberg and the like. There are works by big names and suddenly in the middle I saw a Roland Penrose: Penrose rented a very nice farmhouse in Sussex in the early 1970s where I lived with friends in the days when such things (i.e. living in a beautiful setting in the Sussex countryside) were possible for young professionals. He was best known as the man who brought surrealism to London in the 1930s and later as a collector and the biographer of Picasso. He was married for a long time to the remarkable Lee [Miller](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/photography/10621799/Lee-Miller-the-woman-in-Hitlers-bathtub.html), remembered and acclaimed for her war photography and, secondarily, for her life, or at least the first half of it. She was one of a number of unforgettable heroic adventurous and creative women of the inter-war period (Gerda Taro, Robert Capa’s photography partner, comes to mind). Penrose’s work shown here, entitled The Veteran’ (1938), is quite menacing (see below).

The Museum is a majestic building in neoclassical style like so many public buildings in the US and in its generous environs a Sculpture Garden has been installed which once again provides the visitor with a basic introduction to modern work – Henry Moore, Elizabeth Frink, Barbara Hepworth from Britain as well as Jacques Lipchitz, and other American artists, most of whom were born in Lithuania, Brazil, Israel and elsewhere. Jessica explains to me the work of a Korean artist Do Ho Su entitled [A Tower of Blinded Men](http://www.thisiscolossal.com/2013/02/karma-a-tower-of-blinded-men-rising-into-the-sky-by-do-ho-suh/)

The Garden and much of the Museum’s collection were endowed by a local tycoon, Sydney Besthoff, who made his fortune building up a chain of retail pharmacies.

*Contrasts in time and space*

The contrast between this official culture, with its clean orderly buildings and manicured lawns, generously endowed and maintained with a mix of public and private funds, and the disorderly – but not necessarily less well endowed – streets of the Quarter is of course striking. But my sense was that the Museum was frequented mostly by the local population whereas the Quarter is very much for tourists. It so happens that the BBC’s Radio 4 is currently rebroadcasting a series of four programmes about the city and the [first one](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01pnfjc) which came out on Monday September 29th evokes a New Orleans which has long since been tidied up, cleaned up, spruced up and of course priced up. The atmosphere in the Quarter is manicured chaos. There are still hucksters (I was tricked into having my shoes ‘shined’ for five dollars) and street music and alcohol is consumed 24/7, but no sex for sale that I could see and the faces, as I remarked at the outset, seem whiter than they once were in what is supposedly a creole capital. Some of the dancers on Frenchmen Street were even glancing at their cellphones – they couldn't let go.

*Race*

I cannot conclude without a few words on race. I have not read any of the no doubt numerous studies of the subject in this city, but several things struck me: (a) the serving staff in restaurants and bars were mostly white and in a noticeable number Asian. There were plenty of blacks in the kitchen and performing the more menial tasks like cleaning and washing up; (b) the taxi drivers were mostly immigrants, including some from Haiti and Bangladesh. One Bangladeshi driver had a son who was studying singing on a full scholarship at the Julliard in New York! (c) there was a decent proportion of blacks, presumably tourists and predominantly female, among the customers of the cheaper food outlets, but not in the fancier ones like Little Gems or even the ancient and apparently ramshackle, but pricey, Preservation Hall; (d) the streetcar had two kinds of passengers: tourists with time on their hands and local blacks.

Maybe I am hypersensitive to these issues: as soon as I land in the US I look around and notice racial distinctions everywhere, as if I was immediately infected with the disease of race-sensitivity. In New York (where I spent ten days before going to New Orleans) I could not help notice that barely any customers, or even serving staff in the up-market restaurants we went to were black. Asians are everywhere, but blacks are not. There were no blacks at the concert we went to on the Upper West Side (at the 92Y – a quintessentially Jewish institution) or at the performance of ‘Cabaret’. To be sure this can be explained by the different tastes of black people, but that is precisely the point: how on earth can taste be determined by skin colour? In Brazil people of different colour share many tastes in music, in food, in how they spend their leisure time. Yet the polarization of income between different racial groups is greater in Brazil than in the US. (Such statements are not easy to test convincingly, something the reader should remember)

But the more striking impact in New Orleans was territorial: the deserted streets of the suburban neighbourhoods, the clear contrast between neighbourhoods with big houses and proud verandas, others with smaller but fairly uniform houses and the poor areas with narrow houses, often shotgun homes.

I do not want to end on a negative note: the city offered plenty of fun and cultural ‘improvement’, and every corner was a source of wonderment. I went around with a permanent smile on my face like a naïve Englishman in an exotic tropical location – which is what I was.



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