

The Invention of a Memory: Congo Square and African Music in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans

Ted WIDMER
Washington College

mots-clés/key-words

Congo Square ;
Nouvelle Orléans ;
Musique afro-américaine ;
Danse ; Gottschalk
*
Congo Square ;
New Orleans ;
African-American Music ;
Dance ; Gottschalk

Was Congo Square—now Armstrong Park—in New Orleans, the birth place of jazz music? Very little reliable historical information is available about the place but what we know for certain is that three men, one musician and two journalists, Louis Moreau Gottschalk, George Washington Cable, and Lafcadio Hearn, did construct Congo Square as the starting point of Black music over the course of the nineteenth century. After 1885, Congo Square could be considered as an established part of New Orleans folklore. Gradually the music that started there came to be identified as a central part of American identity.

Despite the enormous worldwide impact of American popular music, and particularly of African-American music, it remains difficult to fix a point of origin for musical genres like hip-hop, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, jazz, ragtime and their blurry nineteenth-century antecedents. But it is not too great a leap of the imagination to assume from these genres, each a variant of its predecessor, that powerful forms of African-American music were performed in the long pre-history before it was possible to record music. What that music sounded like, alas, is nearly impossible to divine, although we can hear fragments of it in the bewildered accounts of European and American travelers, thunderstruck by the fugitive music they occasionally stumbled across in their wanderings.

Perhaps out of frustration with our lack of real knowledge, musical historians have often pointed toward a specific place in nineteenth century America that seems to have acted as a Petri dish for the musical

experimentation that would rock the world a hundred years later. Appropriately, this place was as African as it was American, and was arguably as French and Spanish as well, having joined the United States through the recent Louisiana Purchase. Many aficionados believe that jazz, and by extension, all black music, traces its genealogy to a place in New Orleans called Congo Square, an open plaza on the outskirts of town where African music was performed in the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century. Appropriately, the site of this shrine is named Armstrong Park today, after Louis Armstrong (Johnson).

Was Congo Square ground zero for jazz? In many ways this truism is, in fact, true. But it is deceptive also. To begin, it is very difficult to identify a single signature music that was played there—Congo Square saw many performances from many peoples, and for the most part, they were more percussive and more Africanist than what emerged as jazz around the turn of the twentieth century. One could plausibly argue, based on witness accounts, that Congo Square's heyday, early in the nineteenth century, was more African and West Indian than African-American, in the strict sense of the term. Another important point is that the story of Congo Square was conveyed to most Americans by white intellectuals who had little or no firsthand experience of the Square and its revels. Their discovery—or invention—of Congo Square was as much a creative enterprise as the bewitching music that had once been played there. If it is true, undeniably, that Congo Square was one of the most extraordinary musical places in nineteenth century America, we must also acknowledge that it was a place of the mind as much as it was a real location. The three Bohemians who did the most to lock in its coordinates (Louis Moreau Gottschalk, George Washington Cable, and Lafcadio Hearn), all had a far more distant acquaintance with Congo Square than their frenzied accounts would suggest.

But I do not wish to harp on the point, because I believe that their occasional wanderings from historical reality do not detract much from their achievement. In my opinion, there is something quite important about these early white forays into African-American culture. Each Bohemian had his own reasons, ranging from exoticism to nostalgia to journalistic opportunism. But they all sensed that there was something powerful in the mere suggestion of African music, and they gauged correctly that the public was more ready to accept their forward position than we might have expected. In my opinion, the curiosity generated by the work of Gottschalk, Cable and Hearn created a mass American audience predisposed to think of New Orleans as an exciting crucible of black music, and made the spread of jazz that much easier when it exploded into existence.

When Congo Square was created by municipal ordinance in 1817, it recognized a place that had already existed for decades, though not exactly

THE INVENTION OF A MEMORY

on the map. The actual locality, just outside the French Quarter, had long been frequented by slaves and free blacks for Sunday recreation and market activity. It was also known as Place Publique and Circus Square, after a popular circus that often set up for business there. In other words, it was marginal in every sense; a kind of cultural no man's land, open to the use of society's disenfranchised, but also frequented by whites who enjoyed visiting this peripheral section of the city. White travelers left many arresting accounts of the strange African music they heard there. In 1819, the distinguished architect Benjamin Latrobe, fresh from rebuilding the US Capitol, recorded a wonderful horrified description of Congo Square, concluding, "I have never seen anything more brutally savage." (Latrobe 49-51) But at the same time, like most frightened observers, he was transfixed by the lingering remnants of African culture he beheld, and appreciated its emotional intensity ("ecstasy rises to madness"). Six years later, Timothy Flint wrote, "everything is license and revelry" (Kmen 228) but he too seemed to appreciate the exotic quality of the spectacle. Many other observers came to Congo square to watch the dances, usually combining the same mixture of condescension and fascination (Epstein 97).

One of the most compelling accounts from the mid-nineteenth century came from a middle-class African-American from Tennessee who found Congo Square primitive but intriguing for its African quality. James Thomas wrote:

In the forties I used to go on Sunday to see the blacks dance. They were given a (what is now a park) large Square called Congo green where they indulged in dancing with music made by thumping on the head of a barrel with a skin stretched over it. The performer would thump on it and carry on a chant. Another would beat the sides with two cobs or sticks. The dancers used to wear pieces of tin or some substitute on their legs to make a sort of jingle. I judged it was African music. The people looked as they most of them, were the imported article.

(109)

The first intellectual adventurer to recognize the potential of Congo Square was the pianist and composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829-1869). Gottschalk was born and raised in New Orleans, and grew up near Congo Square. Significantly, his family had been prominent in Saint-Domingue, the source of so many of the African dances performed in Place Congo. Gottschalk's most famous composition, "Bamboula," created a sensation when it debuted in Paris in the revolutionary year 1848. The word "Bamboula" describes an African drum, and it has often been claimed the piece was inspired by the African rhythms he heard as a child in Congo Square. There was no reason to question him at the time. But a closer look at the song's composition casts doubt on this theory. As his biographer, S. Frederick Starr, explains, the young Gottschalk only lived near the square for two years, from 1831 to 1833. Furthermore, it takes an active

imagination indeed to connect “Bamboula” with the Congo Square drumming performances described by Latrobe and his successors. It is an elegant piano composition, with some peculiar left-hand bass lines that suggest percussion, but nothing explosive to modern ears. When he wrote it, in the mid-1840s, he was several thousand miles away from Congo Square, outside of Paris where he was convalescing from a romantic affliction. In many ways, this achievement has little to do with America at all. It borrowed from the French vogue for exoticism in the 1840s, and Gottschalk calculated, correctly, that the French popular imagination would again be seized by Louisiana, in the tradition of Chateaubriand and his imitators. Gottschalk had also written a Scandinavian March and several Arabesque melodies. In other words, he was less a pioneering Africanist than an ambitious merchant of strange, foreign music in a country looking for cross-cultural stimulation. I doubt “Bamboula” ever would have been written had Gottschalk remained in America—and the peculiar, international circumstances of its composition force us to expand our definition of what exactly constitutes an American cultural artifact.

But once he scored this triumph, which we might call the first crossover hit, white Americans slowly took notice. An early biographer of Gottschalk praised the “saturnalia” of Congo Square in 1853, especially emphasizing the drum rhythms played “while the perspiration literally rolls in streams and wets the ground.” (Starr 41) But at the same time, city authorities were trying their best to shut down the Square during a wave of Know-Nothingism in the mid-1850s. They more or less succeeded in 1856, when a law was passed preventing blacks from playing drums and horns in the city. African-Americans continued to play music (no law was strong enough to stop them), but they were forced to find subterranean venues.

Yet this was hardly the end of Congo Square. A generation later, the fabled place provoked yet another wave of interest, partly inspired by Gottschalk’s music. Had the American public finally awakened to the compelling African music in its midst? Not exactly. But they were getting ready to read about it at least. This time, the resurgence of Congomania was entirely the doing of two entrepreneurial journalists, George Washington Cable (1844-1925) and Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904). Beginning in the late 1870s and continuing through the 1880s, they simultaneously mined New Orleans’s romantic past to sell fiction and non-fiction articles to mass-market magazines. As with Gottschalk, there was very little connection to the real Congo Square. It had been dormant for over two decades when they began the process of exhumation (which appropriately involved an exploration of voodoo as well as music).

Cable began the process of bringing the Square back from the dead. He was a curious champion of African-American culture—a Confederate

THE INVENTION OF A MEMORY

veteran, and the descendant of a slaveholding family. But he did not fit into categories easily, as so many writers do not. He was an ardent Francophile and a passionate student of New Orleans history. He also grew into an ardent champion of African-American rights and a gifted writer on Africanist folklore. In November 1879, his novel *The Grandissimes* began to appear in *Scribner's Monthly Magazine*. One of its most dramatic scenes described the capture of a runaway slave named Bras-Coupé in Congo Square. Even if Cable's account was colored by romantic exaggeration, and sprinkled adjectives like "barbaric" through its text, he still described the African musical ambience in detail, and showed a keener anthropological interest than earlier commentators:

On a grassy plain under the ramparts, the performers of these hideous discords sat upon the ground facing each other, and in their midst the dancers danced. They gyrated in couples, a few at a time, throwing their bodies into the most startling attitudes and the wildest contortions, while the whole company of black lookers-on, incited by the tones of the weird music and the violent posturing of the dancers, swayed and writhed in passionate sympathy, beating their breasts, palms and thighs in time with the bones and drums, and at frequent intervals lifting, in that wild African unison no more to be described than forgotten, the unutterable songs of the Babouille and Counjaille dances, with their ejaculatory burdens of "Aie! Aie! Voudou Magnan!" and "Aie Calinda! Dance Calinda!" (Grandissimes 189)

Whether because of Cable or not, interest in Congo Square intensified in the early 1880s. The black novelist William Wells Brown penned an exuberant account of the Square's African rituals in *My Southern Home*, adding that there were "many who believe in them, and who would gladly revive them, ... in every State of the Union." (Brown 124)

Lafcadio Hearn was no less unlikely a candidate than Cable to articulate the lost rituals of the Square. But like Cable and Gottschalk, he had deep personal motives to find alternative sources of American vitality than the milquetoast fiction found in most magazines in the latter half of the century. For one thing, he may have been partly African-American—his mother was Greek with traces of African blood. And there was little doubt about his sympathies—he scandalized Cincinnati by living with a mulatto mistress, and attacked lynching. Like Cable and Gottschalk, he was a connoisseur of French literature, and particularly admired Flaubert and Baudelaire. As a person interested in the African-American experience and France, it was inevitable that he would move to New Orleans. He arrived around the same time as Cable, and soon the two friends launched a miniature cottage industry promoting the strange and occult features of the city's past. The chief forum for their writing was the middlebrow magazine *The Century*, in which Henry James and William Dean Howells also published. That the magazine was interested in New Orleans around this time was no accident, for the Cotton

States Exposition, held in New Orleans in 1884, was attracting nationwide attention. Month after month, either Cable or Hearn published an article that lovingly painted the city's features.

Congo Square naturally struck them as feature material, despite (or more likely because of) its disappearance. Perhaps it was more than a coincidence—perhaps the original African remnants had to disappear before Americans could embrace the square's Africanism as important. Hearn confessed to a friend, “when the bamboulas were danced there was some real ‘Congo’ music; but the musicians are gone God knows where.” But he continued to search out and describe black music, partly because of his hope to repeat Gottschalk's success at cultural mixing thirty years earlier. As Hearn wrote his fellow musicologist H.E. Krehbiel, “Gottschalk found the theme for his Bamboula in Louisiana ... and made a miracle out of it.” He calculated that “there is a rage in Europe for musical folk-lore” and “considering what Gottschalk did with Creole musical themes, it is surprising more attention has not been paid [...]” (Hearn *Life and Letters* 357-358)

Hearn published an account of Congo Square in *The Century* in November 1883, in an article devoted to “The Scenes of Cable's Romances.” His account not only echoed Gottschalk, but probably exaggerated his own personal involvement with the square. Hearn was clearly trying to entice the curious reader, and a note of wistful nostalgia is evident throughout:

[...] Congo Square, the last green remnant of those famous Congo plains, where the negro slaves once held their bamboulas. Until, within a few years ago, the strange African dances were still danced and the African songs still sung by negroes and negresses who had been slaves. Every Sunday afternoon the bamboula dancers were summoned to a wood-yard on Dumaine Street by a sort of drum-roll, made by rattling the ends of two great bones upon the head of an empty cask; and I remember that the male dancers fastened bits of tinkling metal or tin rattles about their ankles, like those strings of copper gris-gris worn by the negroes of the Soudan. Those whom I saw taking part in those curious and convulsive performances—subsequently suppressed by the police—were either old or beyond middle age. The veritable Congo Dance, with its extraordinary rhythmic chant, will soon have become as completely forgotten in Louisiana as the significance of those African words which formed the hieratic vocabulary of the Voudoos.

(*American Miscellany* II 179)

The crowning moment of the rehabilitation of Congo Square was the publication of a lengthy article by Cable in *The Century* in February 1886. “The Dance in Place Congo,” the basis for almost all subsequent interest, aroused intense curiosity among American music-lovers. Like Hearn, Cable showed a longing for the Africanist culture slipping away into the past. He even celebrated Congo Square as a paradigm of democracy, the polar opposite of the refined Place d'Armes in old New Orleans:

THE INVENTION OF A MEMORY

The Place Congo, at the opposite end of the street, was at the opposite end of everything. One was on the highest ground; the other on the lowest. The one was the rendezvous of the rich man, the master, the military officer—of all that went to make up the ruling class; the other of the butcher and baker, the raftsmen, the sailor, the quadroon, the painted girl, and the negro slave. No meaner name could be given the spot. The Negro was the most despised of human creatures and the Congo the plebeian among Negroes. The white man's plaza had the army and navy on its right and left, the courthouse, the council hall and the church at its back, and the world before it. The black man's was outside the rear gate, the poisonous wilderness on three sides and the proud man's contumely on its front.

(Dance 368)

Cable also rhapsodically praised the music and dancing, citing their “constant, exhilarating variety,” and the combination of “such fantastic comicality of words” with “such fierce and frantic dancing.” After pages of detailed transcriptions and heated, voyeuristic descriptions of the dances, he issued a final lament for the disappearance of Congo Square, in so doing enjoining America to awaken to its African-American music:

Times have changed, and there is nothing to be regretted in the change that has come over Congo Square. Still a glamour hangs over its dark past. There is the pathos of slavery, the poetry of the weak oppressed by the strong, and of limbs that danced after toil, and of barbaric love-making. The rags and seminakedness, the bamboula drum, the dance, and almost the banjo, are gone; but the bizarre melodies and dark lovers' apostrophes live on [...]

(Dance 371, 379, 390)

Cable's plea did not go unheeded. Suddenly after 1885, Congo Square emerged as an important, valued part of New Orleans folklore, no longer ridiculed as a peripheral oddity. Cable's work had immediate ramifications. Soon New Orleans was taken seriously as a destination, and Congo Square was recognized as one of the reasons to go there. One result of the square's resurgence was its inclusion in tourist guidebooks. The same authorities that had clamped down on Congo Square a half-century earlier now described it in overexcited terms as a must-see stop on the tourist itinerary. The *Picayune's Guide to New Orleans* borrowed heavily from voodoo imagery to embellish its account of the old “Place des Nègres, or Negro Square” and its uninhibited “Bamboula dancers.” Here is a typical description, written as the first jazz clubs were opening:

Of a Sunday evening it presented a most picturesque and animated scene with its hundreds of dusky dancers, singing their quaint half-Congo, half-Creole songs. Hundreds of the best whites, lured by the fascinating, curious rhythm, sung to the beating of the “tan-tam,” used to promenade in the vicinity of the square to see the negroes dance “Congo.”

(*Picayune's* 42-43)

Gradually, even the most patriotic local citizens got into the act. Grace King was hardly known for her progressive views (she attacked Cable on occasion), but her book *New Orleans: The Place and the People* (1895) included a rhapsodic account of Congo Square, with the obligatory note that “White people would promenade by to look at the scene, and the young gentlemen from the College of Orleans, on their way to the theatre, always stopped a moment to see the negroes dance ‘Congo’.” (King 340) In 1896, the writer Mollie Moore Davis published a short story entitled “A Bamboula,” including racy descriptions of black music that enflame white auditors with sexual passion. A year later, the Storyville district of New Orleans was created to give vent to these ungovernable impulses, and it was here, at last, that jazz was born.

Interest in Congo Square has continued unabated to the present. Beside the many jazz histories that have summoned its ghosts, a few scattered intellectuals have incorporated it into their works. Zora Neale Hurston referred to it in passing in her folklore study *Mules and Men*, quoting an old voodoo priestess who claimed Congo Square dancing was only “a pleasure dance” (Hurston 240-241), and had little religious significance. Some of the earliest jazz pioneers claimed to know about the Square through family tradition—most notably Baby Dodds, the great drummer who accompanied Louis Armstrong on his first recordings.

Today it is known primarily to musical historians as a place where unfettered black music was played with more liberty than usual. But to my mind, part of the fascinating story of Congo Square lies in the degree to which white intellectuals like Gottschalk, Cable and Hearn wrote it for their own needs. Why were they so fascinated? What was it they heard in their heads as they pretended to conjure the memories of the old Place Congo? Resurrecting Congo Square long after its decline, they may strike us as wishful romantics, out of touch with the harsher reality of Jim Crow era race relations. But at the same time, their unrestrained enthusiasm for African-American music forced a reappraisal of black culture to the nation at large. And it still does so—asking us to think more carefully about some difficult questions than we usually do. Was Congo Square African? African-American? American? Why were Gottschalk’s commercial successes in Paris so far from the place he immortalized? To what extent did Cable and Hearn celebrate black music because it spoke to their positions as literary outsiders? Can white Americans honestly depict the African-American experience?

At the time, their achievement was overshadowed by more famous archeologists of disappearing Americana—writers like Twain, Howells, Stowe, and some of the regional voices. But the “discovery” of Congo Square was important—more realistic than the Uncle Remus stories of Joel Chandler Harris, and appreciative of a great cultural power that the United

THE INVENTION OF A MEMORY

States was then only dimly aware that it possessed—the power of African drums to move people's posteriors in something like rhythm. By digging more deeply than their peers, and by genuinely listening to the fascinating sounds of New Orleans, these three cultural pioneers—all Africanist Francophiles—found a useable past of the highest significance. In so doing, Gottschalk, Cable and Hearn prepared Americans everywhere for the series of volcanic musical eruptions that would transform the twentieth century. The specific genealogy is too complicated to delineate—each form of American music has its own traditions. But in a broad sense, jazz, rhythm and blues, rock and roll and their endless mutations emerged from Congo Square—a barely defined, poorly maintained outpost at the margin of a marginal city, lost between different national and racial traditions, borrowing from all of them. When Benjamin Latrobe, the architect of the US Capitol, first came to Congo Square, he could hardly describe the foreignness of what he was seeing and hearing. Two centuries later, those noises have come to define America more vividly than he ever could have imagined.

WORKS CITED

- BLESH**, Rudi and **JANIS**, Harriet. *They All Played Ragtime*. New York: Oak Publications, 1950, 1971.
- BROWN**, William Wells. *My Southern Home*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Negro Universities Press, 1880, 1969.
- CABLE**, George Washington. "The Dance in Place Congo." *Creoles and Cajuns: Stories of Old Louisiana*. Ed. Arlin Turner. Garden City: Doubleday, 1959; *The Granddissimes: A Story of Creole Life*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1957.
- DAVIS**, Mollie Moore. "A Bamboula." *Louisiana in the Short Story*. Ed. Lizzie Carter McVoy. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1940.
- H.D.** (Henry Didimus). *Biography of Louis Moreau Gottschalk. American Pianist and Composer*. Philadelphia, 1853.
- EPSTEIN**, Dena J. *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1977.
- HEARN**, Lafcadio. *An American Miscellany*. Ed. Albert Mordell. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1924; *The Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*. Ed. Elizabeth Briland. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906.
- HURSTON**, Zora Neale. *Mules and Men*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1935.
- JOHNSON**, Jerah. "New Orleans's Congo Square: An Urban Setting for Early Afro-American Cultural Formation." *Louisiana History* XXXII (Spring 1991): 117-157.
- KING**, Grace. *New Orleans: The Place and The People*. New York: Macmillan, 1895, 1920.
- KMEN**, Henry A. *Music in New Orleans: The Formative Years. 1791-1841*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1966.
- LATROBE**, Benjamin H.B. *Impressions Respecting New Orleans*. New York: Columbia UP, 1951.
- STARR**, S. Frederick. *Bamboula!: The Life and Times of Louis Moreau Gottschalk*. New York: OUP, 1995.
- The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans*. 5th edition. New Orleans, 1903.
- THOMAS**, James. *From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur: The Autobiography of James Thomas*. Ed. Loren Schwenger. Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1984.