Opinion
Culture



Members of the Original Big 7 social aid and pleasure club second-line in a scene from director Jason Berry's 2021 jazz funeral documentary "City of a Million Dreams." (Courtesy photo)

Mark Silk

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Three decades ago, Jason Berry earned his place in journalism history by breaking the story of the sexual abuse and coverup scandal in the Catholic church. But as much as the longtime New Orleans freelancer has written about the scandal over the years, his passion has been for his native city and its music.

Three years ago Berry published "City of a Million Dreams," a 300-year soup-to-nuts history of The Big Easy, and this fall he's produced a film of the same name, subtitled "Parading for the Dead in New Orleans," a portrait of the city as seen through its unique jazz funeral parades.

Just as Black musicians created jazz by combining European and African instruments and musical forms, so Black residents of New Orleans seized on European-style funeral processions and made them their own.

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Traditionally, the funeral cortege would march to a cemetery with a brass band playing slow dirges. After interment, the music would turn up the tempo to celebrate the soul's release from its earthly trammels.

The band would then lead a "cutting loose" parade that featured "second liners" dancing their way back to town in celebration of the life of the deceased. The second line has its roots in the African dancing that took place in the city's fabled Congo Square, where enslaved people were allowed to gather on Sundays.

These days, with the growth of the city sometimes creating long distances from church or mortuary to cemetery, the shift from slow to fast music takes place without interment. The music itself marks the release.

Catholic, Baptist, whatever, these jazz funerals know no sectarian boundaries. You might call them the civil religion of New Orleans' souls.

“City of a Million Dreams” trailer still. (Courtesy image)

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While "City of a Million Dreams" documents an institution and its history, it focuses on the personal stories of musicologist and outstanding local clarinetist Dr. Michael White and Deborah Cotton, a Jewish person of color from San Francisco who fell in love with the city and became the parades' foremost videographer. Their stories are inspiring and, in different ways, heartbreaking.

At a moment in American society when cultural appropriation can be considered a capital offense, the film pushes in the opposite direction.

"New Orleans is, you know, this space where so much mixing happens and it's a gumbo," said Black choreographer Monique Moss, who recreated Congo Square dance sequences for the film, after a recent screening.

"If there were to be any pushback against Jason being a European male approaching a subject that appears to be African based, if you watch the film three times in three days like I did, then you get a much clearer understanding that he has just as much of a right to speak on this culture as anyone," she continued.

"There are people from various cultures, who have contributed to New Orleans culture, and so this is one of the reasons why I felt completely okay with joining him in this incredible venture," she said.

"City of a Million Dreams" is currently being shown at the New Orleans Film Festival, which is streaming it for $10 through Nov. 22. Check it out.