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# Where spectators are the parade

By Peter Gerler

As a child living near Boston in the 1950s, I used to watch Memorial Day parades march up Commonwealth Avenue. The morning always seemed beautiful. People, cars, and floats pushed up the warm asphalt, a brass band driving them on. Sousaphone bells flashed as drums beat and batons twirled. Hundreds of people lined the street.

## Urban Diary

In 1990 I moved to New Orleans to research a book on jazz. I remember arriving on a Labor Day weekend when the sky glowed and the scent of magnolias made you drunk. I had found my paradise. And one day on North Rampart Street, in the middle of a funeral parade, I had an epiphany: Here, they don't line: they *second-line*. Instead of just watching the parade, the crowd moves with it and the difference is as day from night. That's because, unlike the inert *thud thud* of most brass bands, New Orleans music swings.

In early 20th-century New Orleans, every occasion from fish fries to Odd Fellows Day needed music. It was part of life, and it had a pulse. Ten-piece marching bands with names like Excelsior, Superior, and Onward would rock down the street. The music drew people out of stores and houses and got them strutting and gyrating by the river or "back o' town." In a second-line parade, Louis Armstrong wrote, "all the people would leave their worries behind."

I luxuriated in New Orleans for a few years. Then a family situation yanked me back to Boston. For a while, I got lost in the straitjacketed "suit" of my proper upbringing. But one spring, I knew I had to go back to the Southland. The New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival was coming up, and I booked a flight.

My friend Steve met me the first night, and we clicked right into JazzFest mode, falling into five jazz clubs in as many hours. But it wasn't until the last day of JazzFest, out at the Fairgrounds, that the log rolled over in the water.

On that Sunday, I was sitting in the Economy Hall tent listening to the Loui-



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**When jazz bands march down streets in New Orleans, people don't watch, they join in, strutting and gyrating to the swing beat.**

siana Repertory Jazz Ensemble, the Rep, as some call it. The Rep delivers the music as it was done originally, reading arrangements from "The Red Back Book" ragtime charts used when jazz first shook the swamp.

Out of the Rep's brilliant sound twirled a second-line group of middle-agers with shorts too short for their bulging legs, T-shirts hanging over their bellies, teeth too long.

Then Steve got in the line. He started moving in a way I didn't recognize, as though somebody had loosened his joints. How could I just sit there? My friend Steve, a respected television journalist, had jumped into the pandemonium, writhing like a reptile.

Because in a second line, you move as part of the music. Your neck and arms want to go in different directions, each so excited: "Let's go this way! No, let's go that way!" The drum rolls, the stars come out, and you know you gotta go!

I leapt into the line. Suddenly I was striding, stepping, 200 people in front and behind — one long organism. My Boston "suit" had fallen off; I had walked

through a portal.

Now out of the crowd stumbled a man carrying food and drinks, oblivious to the music or the dance. He cut right in front of me, through the rocking line, as if we were an annoyance. And a sentence began lifting from my feet into my chest, words wanting to burst except I couldn't get them out. I guess I still wore part of that proper Bostonian suit.

But if they had come 1 inch further into the light of day, they would have said, "Get out of my way; I'm having a religious experience."

So now I am back in Boston, Memorial Day bearing down. Well-behaved crowds will stand by the parades. But I know that (with my hat off to that old Yankee Herman Melville), whenever I find myself becoming down in the mouth, it will be high time to get to New Orleans and into a second line as soon as I can.

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