

NOLA story

experiences in transition

by Henri Ehrlich ('64)

We got to New Orleans in late July after an exciting, relaxing, stimulating, musical drive from Washington DC. via Charlottesville (pre-nazi rally), Louisville, Nashville, Memphis, the Bayou Acadian town of Breaux Bridge and a swamp featuring a couple of mildly threatening alligators. We landed at Angela's baroque rundown mini-mansion in Tremé, with its two winding staircases, assortment of Christmas and Mardi Gras decorations, eclectic salon furniture and paintings, and settled easily into these outskirts of the French Quarter, a neighborhood we were assured and warned was "in transition"

We felt right at home, I tending towards the seedy, Héléne the emotionally available. Our daily walk to the Quarter was always a discovery, every block holding something of interest - human, architectural and, of course, gastronomical. On one of these amblings we met Robin, an African-American entrepreneur somewhere between 30 and 50 years old, who had bought a block of run-down houses on North Claiborne Avenue, the boundary between the transitioning and the already transitioned streets leading to the French Quarter, a mix of highway and Bowery sprinkled with signs of gentrification.

Robin's block was in transition too, with a couple of businesses open, others at different stages of construction and dream. We ate in the Café, where thick old wooden doors served as tables and you could eat breakfast or ribs right there or have them to go. We were the only customers, felt more like travelers visiting a future acquaintance, with a few young helpers drifting in and out, part of Robin's "family". She told us her coffee had gotten first prize in Louisiana, her roasted beans distributed throughout the region, and added that her bar-b-que ribs were just as famous. We devoured a generous mix of ribs, chicken and shrimp, served on a large metal tray with greens, fries and corn bread, all of it complemented by homemade gravy and a very tasty hot sauce, always a highlight for me.

Robin also told us about her adventures in real estate. She apparently bought up run down, sometimes abandoned houses, then renovated them with the help of her army of adopted stragglers. We later gathered she had a reputation, as a mother figure to many human loose ends, loved and respected and maybe a bit feared. There were mysteries surrounding her and a mix of fantasy, selfpromotion and business sense that we found intriguing and amusing. She told us about the works of art she found in houses she was renovating, including a Rembrandt that a curator from the NOLA Museum of Fine Art had inspected and earnestly advised her to give to the museum for protection, which she refused. Robin also spoke of the mansion she had on Esplanade Avenue, that she rented out to groups of young party people for a few thousand dollars a weekend. We

made a note to try to visit Esplanade and take a look at Robin's mansion.

A couple of days later, on a Sunday, feeling right at home, we explored our neighborhood a bit more, visiting the Backstreet Cultural Museum, which I had read about and which featured fabulous Mardi Gras costumes and accessories. The museum, situated in a meandering apartment in a small house, was filled with memorabilia from the parades and street parties that have long characterized New Orleans. Glittery costumes and masks, crazy jewelry, photos and paintings, altars and offerings, memorials to a thriving, wild Black Indian exuberance.

Not far, on the other side of the street, was a fairly big white church from which emanated powerful, rhythmic singing and organ playing that instantly pulled us in. Musical heaven, the kind of Gospel you find all over the country but especially in the South. Singing, shouting and clapping so infectious it can make instant believers out of undernourished atheists like us. This is where a lot of the music I love, the Rhythm & Blues from the late 40s and early 50s that I could kill for, comes from!

Later that day we thought we'd walk a bit further down our street to where it crosses Esplanade and take a look at Robin's party house. We grabbed our cameras and ambled down into our neighborhood, ready to enjoy the pleasures and surprises of transitioning New Orleans. I had this thought at one point that maybe we were being a bit too relaxed, with our unlimited curiosity and expensive cameras, behaving as if we were strolling down Park Avenue. And yet everything seemed so calm, benign and familial.

Esplanade was an eyeful. A broad tree-lined avenue where just about every house was a mansion. This must have been a pretty swank neighborhood, not as flamboyant now, but still impressive, displaying strong traces of old Southern gentry. We noticed one large abandoned mansion surrounded by a high fence topped with strategically placed shards of glass, an incongruous broken down sleeping beauty. We both started snapping pictures of this surreal vision and as I was about to take a vertical view of the front façade an agitated figure confronted me breathlessly saying "I don't want to kill you!" while pointing a fairly big green semi-automatic pistol at me. He was a tall young black man dressed in white with a bandana over his mouth. He took my camera and the \$80 I had in my wallet. I asked him to leave the camera bag because my passport was in it and he let the bag drop to the floor.

During this time H el ene was talking to him saying that we were not rich, that I needed my camera for work. He seemed a bit jumpy, not a real pro. He walked away and then came back to H el ene and gingerly removed the camera by the strap around her neck, ran a bit down the block, then walked quickly out of sight.

We crossed the street and rang the bell of the house on the corner. After a while

a man in his thirties came out and we told him what had just happened. He asked us to wait while he called the police and mentioned he had cameras trained on the intersection because of the frequent automobile accidents that he recorded and posted on youtube. As it happens the whole robbery was caught on video, including a moment in front of his house when the robber turned back to look at us, giving the camera a clear view of his face.

The first police on the scene were there in about 10 minutes. One of them told us jauntily “everything you heard about New Orleans is true”. We had heard that NOLA had one of the highest crime rates in the country but somehow hadn’t at all focused on that. It almost came as a surprise. When two detectives showed up we told our story and Jim, the owner of the house with cameras, told them about the video, which was later acquired by the police. A crime lab team showed up and took our DNA samples as well as samples from the camera bag.

The next day we were summoned by one of the detectives to participate in a photo lineup. He picked us up in his car and drove us to the police station where we waited to identify the robber from a set of six photos. The tape and in particular a still frame of the guy looking straight at the camera had been circulated throughout the NOLA PD and someone had recognized him and sent in a mug shot from a prior arrest.

We were clearly instructed that we should only pick a photo we were 100% sure was of our aggressor because we would incriminate the person we picked and likely condemn him before a court. We had to be completely sure. I went first and could not pick a photo with 100% certainty. In my mind the guy had been a bit nervous, didn’t seem that sure of himself. I was looking for a degree of vulnerability in the eyes that would match my recollection. None of the six men I saw reminded me of him. Two seemed to have some resemblance but not enough to incriminate. I left the small office where the female police officer had conducted the photo lineup, recording my reactions and noting all the facts. Then it was H el ene’s turn. After a while she rejoined me and we waited for the results.

The detective soon came back, beaming. “She picked the right one!” Bingo! H el ene then explained that what had made her sure was the look of hate in the eyes of the man she picked. She remembered the same look coming from the guy who robbed us, an aggressive, intense, hateful look. Funny, because my recollection was entirely different. I had found him to be unsure of himself, a bit tentative, clumsy, a rookie. I had felt vulnerability where H el ene had seen hardness.

Returning home

We never heard back from the detective. I left a few messages inquiring about the case, hoping against all odds our cameras might be found in some pawn shop. On my third attempt to get information, I was informed the police had

arrested the man in the mug shot. Never heard anything else, no more information. We were more cautious after that, even taking cabs back home to our friendly transitioning neighborhood. Angela, our 85-year-old host, still active as a psychic healer with a number of patients living in her second house out back, usually found in the early evening hours sitting on her front stoop drinking from a bottle of wine smiling and chatty, empathized with us and reminisced about the time she was woken up one night by a tall man standing over her, pointing a gun at her head.

We left NOLA with no bitterness, rather attached to the city and its psychic energy, forgiving easily of our aggression, sorry to have lost the images recorded, and flew to LaLa land to hang out with H el ene's cousins for a few days. One of the first things I did was buy a new camera identical to the one stolen, so I could resume recording our US epic and pursue my budding career as a travelling cameraman in the tradition of Andr e de la Varre and the Lumiere Brothers. Luckily I had downloaded everything until NOLA so that NOLA was the only image-less part of our trip.

We had some great adventures over the next month, including dinner at my mother's 94-year-old childhood friend from Lodz Yvette, who remembered insignificant and fascinating details from life in Poland in the 30s, and a visit to the passionate collector and historian of the American Musical Theater Miles Kreuger, whom I had been in touch with about 30 years earlier and with whom I had unequivocally agreed that the 1936 Universal version of "Showboat", directed by James Whale and starring Irene Dunn, Alan Jones, Helen Morgan, Paul Robeson, Hattie McDaniel and Charles Winninger, was the best musical ever made. We had a hundred out-of-reality sightings on the Hollywood "walkway of the stars", a great pastrami sandwich at Factors Deli, really authentic spicy Thai food, drinks at the vintage 1920s lounge of the Culver Hotel, a pit stop at Musso & Frank's, and other typically L.A. activities, for me. In San Francisco, our next stop, we stumbled onto a terrific restaurant in North Beach called House, spent a little time in an historic seedy blues bar, hung out in Chinatown listening to Chinese Opera in the park and many other wonderful moments not all gastronomic. True, many of the highlights of our trip centered on food - in Nashville, Memphis, Berkeley, New Orleans, Harlem and even upstate New York, usually accompanied by a good deal of atmosphere and soul. A soul food trip.

Later, back in Paris, we could re-live some of our adventures looking at the many stills and videos H el ene and I shot - all except for the panorama of New Orleans, left in the hands of the perpetrator. Still, NOLA remained a pleasant memory, full of rich colorful detail, intense musical moments and hot cuisine.

Nine months passed and one day in late April I received a call on my cell from an assistant New Orleans DA named Landing. She said she was so glad to finally track me down and wanted to know if we would agree to come to NOLA to testify

at the trial of the man they had arrested in early August. She wanted to know if we could come in a few days. We told her we couldn't change our schedules at such short notice but could be available for the other date she mentioned, on May 7th. She soon confirmed the date and told us someone named Sue would take care of the travel arrangements. Sue wrote that she was not too familiar with travel arrangements but would do her best. We asked her to make the return for a few days after the trial so we could hang out in New Orleans a bit, take advantage of the trip.

A couple weeks passed with no word from the DA. I spoke to Sue who explained things were a bit difficult to organize, it being the final weekend of Jazzfest. I registered this bit of information and started checking out the lineup for Sunday's Jazzfest event, the final one of the festival. Turned out there would be Smokey Robinson, one of my R&B idols. Didn't know he was still performing live, very exciting! There was also Buddy Guy, Trombone Shorty and a mix of rock, blues, jazz, gospel and zydeco. We also heard that the food there was great, an event definitely not to be missed. I reserved 2 passes and bus tickets to the Fairgrounds. We were hot to trot.

A travel company emailed us our reservation and after a couple of changes we were set to leave early morning Saturday May 5th. Then, on Thursday evening I got a call on my cell from a 514 NOLA number. It was Sue explaining that they had to change the date because the new mayor had cancelled all trials set for Monday May 7th so that government employees would be free to join the city in celebrating his election. They wanted to move the trial to some time in June and our tickets were being cancelled. I wrote that we would not be available in June and that making arrangements for the current planning had required changes of patients' appointments for H  l  ne among other adjustments, not to mention the fact we had paid \$200 for Jazzfest tickets.

Friday morning, disappointed by the change in plans, we went about our normal business, forgetting about preparing for the trip. Friday evening, I got another call from Sue: "We have decided to have the trial on the 7th in order to accommodate your schedules. The arrangements stay the same, leaving tomorrow morning from Paris."

We were pleased of course, getting a 4-day all-expenses-paid vacation in New Orleans, perfectly timed for Jazzfest. Also, feeling like NOLA regulars by now, we were sure to have a good time.

At the airport we were picked up by Leslie, a solid 40-ish blonde army veteran now working as an investigator for the DA's office. She was garrulous, spoke about her kids, her background, her experience serving in Europe, her whole family being military, navy pilots, how she was going to send her musically talented son to school at The Citadel, how lucky we were to go to Jazzfest. We found her interesting in an oblique sort of way, not really sure what to make of

her, but welcomed the friendly greeting. She also told us that the judge was quite liberal, not a hanging judge, had opposed the death penalty in several cases. They had all agreed to keep the trial date as originally planned so that we could come and testify, in spite of the fact the newly elected mayor had decided to declare the day a holiday. She took us to a Marriott on the other side of the river from the city center and told us she'd pick us up at 9AM Sunday so we could be briefed by the DA and still have time to enjoy Jazzfest.

Assistant DA Steve Gonzales arrived wearing shorts and a t-shirt, ready for a day of leisure. A small man in his early thirties, he was polite, a bit formal but friendly and thanked us for agreeing to testify. He explained that we would basically be asked to describe what happened and hopefully identify the defendant as the man who robbed us. Pretty straightforward. He added that our testimony would be important given that the defendant was charged with offenses that carried a minimum sentence of 45 years. This news came as a shock. We never imagined such a thing and I instantly thought that if I had known I wouldn't have come. We asked how that could be and Gonzales explained that there were mandatory sentences that cumulate. We were told that he had a record, had recently served a few years and was on probation at the time of the robbery. He had violated his probation by going to the city and possessing a firearm. Then there were three charges stemming from the robbery itself. First charge was robbing me, second charge was robbing Hélène and third charge was using a gun. Once you accumulate all the robbery charges plus the probation charges, the state's mandatory sentence requirements call for between 45 and 198 years in prison. He also told us that judge Deville was "pretty liberal" and had argued against the death penalty in several cases. At this point Leslie, who had been listening to all of this, got up and left the room, seeming annoyed at the way Gonzales had presented us with the possible sentences. I started regretting we had agreed to testify and asked if we could have an effect on the sentence. We were told we could, and would have the opportunity to talk to the judge before sentencing. We listened attentively, started wondering what kind of system this was, but ready for our day in court, albeit with a slightly shifted perspective on the dynamics and some apprehension. Gonzales drove us in his jeep to the bus stop from which we would be ferried to the Jazzfest Fairgrounds. He told us he was originally from New York. I asked him if he was Puerto-Rican and he seemed surprised I had guessed that.

Jazzfest was ok. Bit of a soulful Disneyland. We had some great food and heard some pretty good music. Buddy Guy wasn't bad, not great. Steve Miller Band was good for redneck watching, some cool zydeco music with people dancing in front of the stage, a pleasant gospel group, some ok jazz from Trombone Shorty, but what made up for the shortcomings here and there was the fantastic performance from one of my all-time idols, one of the greatest composerarranger-singers of all time – Smokey Robinson. A sprightly 78, he undulated and crooned lasciviously, flirting with every woman in the crowd, caressing his lyrics, smoking the notes, as sensually expressive as when he was a young

Miracle. For me, there aren't too many other singers who can imbue a song with as much sexual energy, drag from a note so much of its latent sensuality, and do it with the lightest of touches. Way more than Marvin Gaye, different than Otis Redding. The closest I can think of is Charles Trenet in a few of his recordings

So Jazzfest was definitely worth going to, and if that had been the only cultural event of our trip, we would have been satiated and happy to have made the 10,000 mile trip to the NOLA DA's class in judicial theater

The trial

Monday morning, Steve escorted us from the DA office building to the Courthouse, pulling his legal suitcase on wheels. He left us in the lobby where we met another assistant, Fern, who took us to the courtroom and then to a small room off to the side where witnesses waited until they were called in by the court. We waited what seemed like hours and got to know Jim who was there to testify, presumably to confirm that the tape of the man robbing us was recorded from his house by his cameras and recount the event from his perspective. It turned out he had been a teacher when NOLA still had public schools and left when the whole system went charter. We were astounded to learn there were no more public schools in New Orleans, only private schools and charters. We also learned that Jim, who was originally from New Jersey, had done a bit of travelling and was very familiar with the Loire valley, having almost bought an old farmhouse there. Behind the fairly simple and modest exterior lurked a man of refined tastes and progressive politics. And by the time we were through with him, we had a short list of the best eateries in town. We look forward to returning the favor the next time he and his wife are in Paris. An interesting note during this waiting period was Leslie's sudden appearance. She sat down with us and started chatting away, still as voluble and friendly, a bit intrusive. When we mentioned we were discussing charter schools she exclaimed how good they were, how the kids were getting good test scores. We later wondered if she hadn't been sent to keep an eye on us

Jim was called in to testify and we waited our turn. Finally, I was called and entered the courtroom. I took the oath to tell the truth and nothing but and sat in the witness chair to the left of the judge. Judge Karen A. Deville was a small pleasant, sensible and humane looking woman. She inspired confidence. Across from me were the prosecutor, defendant and defense attorney. In the back of the courtroom I could see a few black faces that seemed to belong to the defendant's family. Assistant DA Gonzales looked determined, alert and somewhat professional. The defendant, James Wright, looked intense and very tall. His lawyer looked like a character out of an old cable comedy series. He seemed to be playing a part, exaggeratedly dramatizing every question and comment. The first thing he did was ask Wright to say the words "I don't want to kill you", presumably to show that his wasn't the voice I had heard from my assailant. Wright, from his seat about 15 yards away from me, almost whispered "I don't

want to kill you". That routine was almost incriminating in its absurdity. Wright was asked to stand and approach me and repeat the words, louder. He still sounded soft-spoken. The defense attorney asked me if I recognized the voice and I said I wasn't sure. Then he showed me tattoos on Wright's left arm that went almost to his shoulder and asked me to compare them to those visible in the still from the surveillance video. I couldn't really tell since the tattoo in the still was difficult to make out. Finally, Gonzales asked me to quantify how sure I was this was the man who robbed us. I said 75%.

Hélène was brought in next and took the oath, repeating all the words instead of just saying "I do". Not the last touch of comedy during this long day. The defense attorney made a series of demonstrations to show that the defendant was not the man who robbed us. First he showed Hélène stills from the surveillance tape in which the earlier part, in which the guy looks back towards us, has a date that is later than the date on the section showing the robbery. Hélène just thought the machines must've been out of whack. Then she was asked to compare the nose of the guy in the video with that of the man in the police mug shot. Different angles, bad resolution on the video still, so hard to judge. She was asked what she thought of the fact the mug shot was 6 years old. She was asked what she would think if she found out the defendant had an alibi.

Then Gonzales made the court hear Hélène's whole recorded photo lineup session that ended with her exclaiming "that's him!" At one point the screen Gonzales was using to show various evidence and pictures suddenly featured a shot of him and his wife looking like newlyweds smiling at the camera. Oops! Hélène, the court stenographer and the judge tried not to crack up. Gonzales asked Hélène if she was briefed in any way before looking at the photos at the police station, if she was at all coerced or influenced. At the end of her testimony she was asked if she could identify James as the robber. She said she wasn't completely sure. When she left the stand, James seemed to mouth a "thank you".

There was testimony from the policewoman who conducted the photo lineup, the detective who recognized James from the video still, and the one who had arrived at the scene and driven us around. And there was testimony from James's mother, trying to confirm his alibi. She didn't make a very good witness, seeming unsure of the facts, contradicting herself, and generally in a bit of a daze. James's alibi was that he had been at his mother's house all day watching Netflix. Under questioning from Gonzales, it was clear James's mother had not been in the same part of the house and had no idea of his comings and goings. She came off as a bit absent-minded and a very bad actor.

The defense claimed that James couldn't have committed the crime, for several reasons:

- He was at his mother's house watching Netflix
- He had had an accident at the warehouse he worked in where, by the way, he was being paid very good wages. He showed a bandage that was

found in the car James was driving when he was arrested. Defense explained James couldn't possibly hold a gun while being hurt. (Gonzales questioned how he could be driving).

Gonzales described the scene of James's arrest. He was arrested a week after the robbery while driving a car he said he was going to buy, with no papers on him. He also happened to have a few cartridges sitting in the back seat, as well as a handkerchief with a pattern resembling the one the robber wore on the day of the crime. James said the cartridges belonged to the owner of the car.

Finally, it was James's turn to testify. He claimed he had an accident at work just before the day of the crime. He seemed more articulate than his lawyer. At one point he heatedly assailed Gonzales for trying to paint a completely negative picture of him, ignoring his achievements, his family life, his continuing his studies, having a good job, his "positive" side. He was suddenly very different from the guy who hesitantly whispered "I don't want to kill you".

The missing piece in the puzzle was a glaring omission we couldn't understand: no one had conducted a DNA test. And yet the robber had handled my camera bag and the crime lab had taken DNA from the bag, from H el ene and from me. Almost a year later, and after what we understood was an earlier partial trial of the case in January, no DNA test had been asked for!

It was decided the trial would resume in three weeks, the time it takes to get a DNA result. Gonzales was asked to try to speed things up. Defense added that it would also bring additional evidence, namely a letter from James's employer attesting to his accident. Didn't seem like the most carefully prepared trial to us, and we were nine months after the event, nine months during which James was presumably kept in jail!

The trial lasted about 10 hours, from 9AM to 7PM. There was no break, no food. At one point James left the courtroom and was apparently given a sandwich. He was the only one who ate anything. Towards the end of the day, a court assistant handed H el ene and I an energy bar. After the trial everyone seemed pretty chummy. Karen the judge chatted with us and said how Steve (Gonzales) was "one of our best assistant DAs". Gonzales packed his papers neatly, seeming satisfied with his day's work although he confided he didn't think there would be a guilty verdict since all the evidence was circumstantial. The defense attorney came over to us and told us about his New York background, all smiles. Gonzales was packed and ready to go and we followed him and his rolling suitcase back to the DA building.

As we left the courthouse, Steve confided in us. He told us that now that we had testified he could tell us that a few days earlier he had offered James a plea bargain: 3 years' probation if he pleaded guilty. James had turned it down, opting for the trial with the possible 45 to 198-year sentence. We found this incredible,

completely illogical, unless James knew somehow for sure that the verdict would come out not guilty. And yet, in spite of the fact that, after being in the same room with James for 10 hours we weren't at all sure he was the robber, mainly because he seemed built differently and had a different presence, the evidence, even if circumstantial, seemed to be very much against him. Between his poorly supported alibi, the phony looking bandage, his mother's unconvincing act, the bullets, the scarf, the circumstances of his arrest, and his lawyer's ham-handed impersonation of a defense attorney, one had trouble understanding why he would hesitate one second to take the plea bargain. One could, however, equally wonder why Gonzales would offer such a deal in the first place unless he knew what the DNA would show.

We left NOLA with mixed feelings, happy to have spent time in a city we were getting to know and appreciate more and more, perplexed at the way the judicial system functioned. The DA's office had spent at least \$5,000 on our last-minute flights and accommodations but we never had the sense there was a strategy in place. They must've just thought we would identify Wright as the robber and that would be it. \$5000 spent, a possible 45 to 198-year sentence, no DNA, 3 years' probation, thank you very much for your help.

We had been told we would have our say with the judge before sentencing and would be able to ask for leniency, something we definitely wanted to do. Whether guilty or not, we felt that no person should get what amounts to a life sentence for committing a robbery. We waited the 3 weeks for the DNA test to come back and I wrote to Gonzales asking for news. He wrote back that they had found no DNA matching James Wright's. The verdict took a while longer and on June 5 Gonzales wrote:

"The verdict actually came today because the judge had yet to make up her mind yesterday. Today however, the judge unfortunately found the defendant not guilty. I appreciate your willingness to come to Louisiana and testify at this trial and I hope this result doesn't deter you from visiting our city in the future. It was a pleasure meeting you and I wish you the best. Thank you again."

We were relieved, to say the least. Hélène had agonized over the fact her identification of James Wright could contribute to a life sentence for a 25-year-old black man when much greater crimes, including cold-blooded murder, go unpunished on a daily basis when the defendant is white, rich, connected, or with the police.

A few weeks later, perusing DVD titles at a local branch of the Paris public library, I noticed they had three seasons of the series "Tremé". I had heard the name of the series somewhere but hadn't made the connection to our neighborhood in NOLA. I took a few episodes home and, as we watched the characters living their stories and the city living its story, we felt right at home. We even felt a twinge of recognition when one of the street musicians gets shot in

the head after being robbed, thinking that could've happened to us. The bittersweet experience that is New Orleans grows on you and stays with you.

The terrible thing is this city, like so many others, is being completely remade. It's being dressed down and whipped into shape by developers and politicians who would keep the glitter but not the feeling, and have few qualms about making NOLA inhospitable to its natives. It's not surprising crime is so high. There's a cold-blooded transformation taking place that has little to do with this city's history and soul.

New Orleans is another great city we will want to return to, to experience it again while it still has so much life and charm. A unique city being eviscerated and monetized like New York and San Francisco have been, it is part of a threatened species. Without its mix of people, petty criminals included, it will become a glittery shell of itself, empty-headed and bureaucratic. And pretty soon we'll all be able to sing that great number from the film "New Orleans", the one Billie Holiday sings to Louis Armstrong, "Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans?"