

In Louisiana: Jazzman's Last Ride



CHRISTOPHER MARRIS

In traditional procession, a jazz band does a slow dirge down Elysian Fields Avenue

Boom! A cannon shot from the Society Jazz Band bass drum jolts the chattering crowd outside the Gertrude Gedes Willis Funeral Home into a brief silence. The casket is coming out. Boom! A second shot signals the stricken cadence of a dirge. The white gloves of the pallbearers flash in the morning sun as they float their burden to the silver-gray Cadillac hearse. The main party of mourners, a score or so, fit themselves into several cars waiting in line.

Boom! Boom!

A cornet sings out the opening tones of a familiar old hymn. Quickly, other voices surge forth, trombones, saxophones, a beseeching clarinet, trumpets, tubas. The sound of *Just a Closer Walk with Thee* throbs across the leafy neighborhood of rundown houses, gas stations, union hall, stores and churches. It is late in the year, but the weather is soft. Just above, on the elevated expressway, traffic whips by, but on the ground the slow beat of the music warps the day's rhythm into a doleful sway.

A jazz funeral is beginning in New Orleans. Though hardly disrespectful, the underlying temper is festive. The reason lies in tradition: when the funeral is done, the streets will explode with jubilant jazz and antic celebration. To see it is to understand what Trumpeter Willie Pajaud meant when he said: "I'd rather play a funeral than eat a turkey dinner."

In New Orleans as far back as memory runs, marching brass bands have always tried to spread a bit of joy after the sorrow of a burial. Every jazz giant in the New Orleans pantheon—Kid Ory, Jelly Roll Morton, Bunk Johnson—developed his art partly by playing for funerals. The king of them all, Louis Arm-

strong, played a funeral the very day in 1922 when a telegram sent him off to join King Oliver in Chicago and soon onward to world fame.

Years later, in the record *New Orleans Function*, Armstrong recalled the traditional funeral by using *Flee as a Bird* as the processional dirge, *Didn't He Ramble* as a sample of swinging postburial music and an affectionate spoof of graveside eulogy. Says the Rev. Satchmo: "Ashes to ashes/ Dust to dust/ It's too bad old Gate/ Couldn't have stayed on earth with us." Armstrong never referred to a jazz funeral. Those who have nurtured the tradition speak simply of a funeral "with a band of music." Given New Orleans' love for parades, the outcome, however, is the same—and perhaps inevitable. A musical funeral procession always attracts a crowd much bigger than the main body of mourners, and it is this public aggregation, known as "the second line," that surrenders to a carnival spirit after the band "turns the body loose" (as the musicians put it), and on the homeward march begins rocking the air with solid jive.

The man being laid to rest today was himself a jazzman. Albert Walters was his name. His melodic cornet was heard around town for more than half a century—and is still to be heard on such records as *Albert Walters with the Society Jazz Band* and *West Indies Blues*. Walters taught himself piano as a kid, took up the horn in 1927. He liked to say he was a carpenter by trade but a musician by choice. He appeared now and then with other traditionalists in Preservation Hall, but mostly he worked with Society Jazz. A short, stocky man, widowed several years ago, Walters retired from carpen-

tering but never thought of quitting music. In fact, he had just had his horn reconditioned when he died of a heart attack at 75.

Albert Walters and his cornet took part in countless jazz funerals over the years. Now that his time has come, he is fondly remembered at his own funeral. The voice of English-born Drummer Andrew Hall, leader of Society Jazz: "You know his music had real feeling. He was funny too. He used to stick his finger in his ears while he was playing to check intonation. Said he could hear himself better that way." Tenor Saxophonist Teddy Johnson: "He was always ready for a laugh, always joking, making up nicknames for people. I called him Big Chief." There is wordless comment in the fact that musicians from not only Society Jazz but several other bands (Olympia, Tuxedo) have turned out to make sure that one of their own gets a fitting send-off.

Now a procession forms that fills up two lanes of spacious St. Bernard Avenue. The musicians, a dozen, whose numbers will grow with late arrivals, make a loose formation. The second-liners—youth and old, black and white, gen-



Backed by brass, a mourner uncovers

teel and funky, sober and not entirely so—press in upon the band's flanks, spill onto the sidewalks, straggle across the avenue's landscaped divider. Leading it all is a stately, gray-haired man in a frock coat and a silvered, tasseled sash, a spangled umbrella furred under his arm, a top hat held over his heart; and, alongside him, a shorter man, similarly gray and with similar bearing and similar attire. Thanks to confusion resulting from the mix of bands, the procession has wound up with two grand marshals. ("Albert would have laughed at that," Teddy Johnson says later.) Yet the two move as one: in perfect time with the cadence, each meticulously executes a gravely swaying strut. They are undistracted by whimsical second-liners who invade the street to emulate their not quite imitable style.

Boom! Boom!

The procession creeps forward, passing the squat, faded hall of Hod Carriers

Local Union 153, a one-story commercial social center (AVAILABLE FOR ANY OCCASION), the New Bethel Missionary Baptist Church, white with green trim. *Lead Me, Savior* has followed *Just a Closer Walk with Thee*, and soon the dirge is *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. The band is taking up *The Old Rugged Cross* as it comes to a halt under some towering live oaks: the front yard of Corpus Christi Catholic Church.

The deep church bell tolls. The casket passes into the decorous stillness of the vaulted interior, leaving the hundred or so second liners and the musicians outside. The organ plays hymns that would be favorites in any Baptist church: *In the Garden, Just as I Am*. A priest reads from *Job* and speaks of the "gift of music" that Albert Walters had. Funerals like Walters', as William J. Schaffer fairly puts it in *Brass Bands and New Orleans Jazz*, are "public acts, theatrical displays designed not to hide burial as a fearful obscenity but to exhibit it as a community act." And the public's participation afterward is "a celebration of life as much as a recognition of the triumph of death."

Boom! As soon as the casket emerges, a bass drum shot shatters the air. The dirge-playing band leads the way up the road toward the cemetery, then separates from the casket. At first it retraces its route by drumbeat alone. Then the trumpet screams forth, the drummers swing out, belted choruses of *The Second Line* assail the sky. The crowd, most of it, becomes a blur of fidgeting feet, twisting torsos, bobbing heads. A corpulent man in an orange shirt spins and dips. An elderly woman executes a scampering step with the help of her cane. An open-shirted youth leaps to the hood of a car and, after a flurry of steps, floats down to earth without breaking his rhythm. Here and there gaudy umbrellas twirl in the air. Faces gleam with sweat and exuberance.

The scene becomes a moil of solo showing off, a gleeful choreographic cadenza that no choreographer could plot. All movement is as spontaneous as the music, which soon rides into *Going to the Mardis Gras* and, at last, into the tune that seems to be everybody's great expectation: *When the Saints Go Marching In*. A young woman in frayed jeans curves backward, in an affront to gravity, all the while clapping her hands, rending the air with throaty singing—"Oh, when the saints..." At times such carryings-on have been known to get out of hand.

But not today. In half an hour it is over—except for the receding ripples of laughter and neighborly joshing. The musicians mosey by twos and threes toward their cars at the hall. For a moment it is hard to remember the funeral that must by now have ended at the distant cemetery. It is easy, however, to remember Albert Walters. If his days on earth had even a dash of the style of his leaving it, he was no man to be pitied.

—By Frank Trippett