André Gladu's

Liberty Street Blues

"Jazz came up the Mississippi from New Orleans, it didn't come down the Allen expressway from York University."

— Jazz guitarist Peter Leitch

or an art form purported to be the 'Universal Language', music is largely dependent on a sense of place for its identity. Perhaps for this reason, Dixieland or New Orleans jazz never made much sense to me anyway in a Canadian context. My experience of Dixieland was of a bunch of middle-aged amateurs creating a cacophony on tunes such as When The Saints Go Marching In.

But I have seen the light (Hollywood), or at least the light passing through André Gladu's new film Liberty Street Blues, a documentary about New Orleans jazz which succeeds brilliantly in showing how rooted, socially relevant and swinging this music really is.

As well as being an excellent primer on black music in the Crescent city, the film continues the recent Quebec fascination with things marginal in American culture. At the outset, Gladu draws parallels between Montreal and New Orleans; both cities are apart from their surroundings (both physically and culturally), with a unique ethnic mix and confusion of cultures which results in fertile ground for experimentation and the growth of new creative forms.

Stylistically, Liberty Street Blues shares little with the films of the NFB's Americanites series (of which it is not strictly a part). Absent are the documentaries and collage elements of, for instance, Jacques Godbout's Alan Will Janes. Instead, Gladu offers the film equivalent of the recent "Day In The Life" photojournalism books. The centrepiece of this day in the life of New Orleans is the annual parade organized by the Young Men's Olympian Aid and Social Pleasure Club, an organization which had its origins in the immediate post-Civil War era. And at the centre of the parade is the music, as played by the Tuxedo Brass Band. Our guide to the proceedings is Dr. Michael White, introduced as a professor at Xavier University and clarinettist with the Tuxedos. (Not in the film, but noteworthy, is Michael White's role as head of a New Orleans board of education program called Jazz Outreach, designed to give students an appreciation of their city and its musical heritage.)

We meet Michael White warming up his clarinet on the morning of the parade. At the same time of day, Gladu crosscuts to a variety of scenes: from the market where vegetable and pie vendors hawk their wares with musical cadences, to the street-rapping proprietor of a shoe shine stand, to young girls playing complicated clapping/rhyming games in a schoolyard. The effect is to reinforce what Michael White states in his car on the way to the parade: that this music, New Orleans jazz, grows out of the soil of the delta and that it has a strong social function in addition to being the precursor of the art form that Charlie Parker and others elevated beyond the general comprehen-
The parade itself is no mere entertainment; it's an improvised celebration in a city where 40 per cent of students don't finish high school and where 48 per cent of the citizens live below the poverty line. But, of course, that's what makes the event both a communal celebration and an act of defiance. That the parade takes place at the pleasure of the authorities is made clear by the fact that the participants have only four hours in which to hold the event, including the time-honoured custom of stopping along the way at various community centres and institutions for a little infant feeding. Glauco underlines this fact by passing back to indicate the presence of a white, mounted policeman trailing the parade at a distance. During the parade sequences, Glauco makes good use of a handheld camera, giving the viewer the impression of being in the midst of the musicians, dancers and participating spectators.

Like the parade, the film makes judicious use of time-outs. In this case, it's in the form of side-trips to a variety of musical settings which reinforce the notion of the music as a socially cohesive force. First stop is a jazz house party featuring Dr. White's Original Liberty Jazz Band. Eighty-eight-year-old bass player Chester Zardis offers some instructive slap bass technique (early funk), and a few phrases in French, a reminder of the ethnic diversity within New Orleans' black community. Banjo player Danny Barker, who played with Jelly Roll Morton, offers his interpretation of 'Gladu's' taste of bears' feet and rice and talks about how music has been his passport to a wider world. And best of all, pianist and singer Sadie Colar, a spry 78-year-old, relates a terrific anecdote about playing the blues, her severe, church deacon father and the jazz-loving parish priest.

The atmosphere here is warm and nurturing, as it is later in the film when we sit in on a rehearsal of the five-man cajun group The Zion Harmonizers. But there's a different reality in Congo Square and in the clubhouses of the 'Black Indians'. Here music plays a more elemental role. Rural groups, the White Cloud Hunters and the White Eagles, compete and challenge one another not with violence, but through ritualized confrontations involving music, generally percussion-based. This sequence leaves the impression (how accurate?) that New Orleans is the only place in North America where skill with a cajun drum replaces skill with a weapon among inner-city youth gangs. The music of New Orleans, Glauco seems to be saying, is such a strong force for social coherence that it successfully sublimates the violence that would normally pervade such a dispossessed community. Here, perhaps, the film indulges in a bit of ideological romanticism that is generally avoided elsewhere.

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