Charles Chamberlain, formerly on the staff at the Hogan Jazz Archive and now at the Louisiana State Museum, has been a steady source of local and global knowledge. He read this manuscript and offered numerous suggestions. And finally, it is a pleasure to acknowledge the greatest scholarly debt I incurred while writing this book, which is to Bruce Boyd Raeburn, curator of the Hogan Jazz Archive, who gave me something of a personal tutorial in the intricacies of his archive and early jazz. Without Bruce's deep knowledge and generous spirit, this book simply would not have been possible.

My greatest personal debt is to my family, to Tekla, as always, and to Leo and Roger in this case, especially.

In the early twentieth century, New Orleans was a place of colliding identities and histories, and Louis Armstrong was a gifted young man of psychological nimbleness. The city and the musician were both extraordinary, their relationship unique, their impact on American culture incalculable.

He loved to reminisce about New Orleans. He believed that he was born on July 4, 1900, though we now know that his birth took place a year later, on August 4, 1901. His young parents, unwed and barely acquainted, left him in the care of his paternal grandmother, Josephine. His mother, Mary (short for Mary Ann), fifteen years old at the time of his birth, moved to a different part of town; Louis did not see much of her or his father, Willie, for the first five years of his life. Josephine took the responsibility for raising him, and he had strong, positive memories of her. He was sorry to leave her when it came time to join his mother and his little sister, Beatrice, also known as "Mama Lucy."

For the next six years, the three of them lived in a two-room house in the area around Liberty and Perdido streets, a neighborhood Armstrong described as the "cheap Storyville"—that is, a downscale prostitution district. It was also alive with African-American music. During the day, parades circulated through or near the area, and so did advertising wagons, each with a little band. At
night, music poured out of dance halls and honky tonks, little places for gambling that often had a musician or a small band.

Armstrong grew up poor, but he had easy, constant access to all of this music and more. He learned the names of musicians and noticed the growing reputation of cornetist Joe Oliver. His own music making started in a Sanctified church, with his mother, where he learned to sing while the congregants applauded his efforts. He hung out with a "rags-bottles-and-bones" man named Lorenzo who held him "spellbound" with talk about music. In the evenings he peeked through cracks in the walls of Funky Butt Hall to watch the dancers and get familiar with the cornet styles, and he sometimes snuck into honky tonks at night to listen to blues. By age ten or so he had formed a little vocal quartet with some friends. The people in his community loved to make music, and they typically did so without much training or equipment—just a lot of heart and willingness, Armstrong would later say.

He was not closely supervised at home, and though he did have memories of school, he probably did not attend very often. He spent a lot of time on the streets with his buddies, following parades and hunting up mischief. It all caught up with him on New Year's Eve in 1912. While he and the quartet were out on one of the biggest nights of the year, hustling tips in the real Storyville, he was arrested for firing a gun and sentenced, on January 1, 1913, to the Colored Waif's Home for Boys. He spent about eighteen months there and emerged with a cornet and enough technique to impress not only his friends and neighbors but also a local honky tonk owner, who hired him, at the tender age of fourteen, to play blues late into the night.

For the next few years he held various jobs—collecting rags, delivering coal, delivering milk, washing dishes, loading boats on the docks—while trying to advance his cornet playing. He continued to live with his mother and sister and various "stepfathers" (as he playfully referred to May Ann's boyfriends) and was proud to bring home his first small earnings through music. As a substitute in bands he took the odd musical job here and there trying to find his place in the huge network of ear-playing musicians who likewise held common labor jobs and played music on the side. Around age fifteen he gained a clear advantage over most of them: Joe Oliver decided to take him under his wing. Oliver gave him lessons in his home and stopped by places where he was playing. He made it clear that Louis was welcome to hang around his band, both on parades and in dance halls, and he gave him a cornet. According to Oliver's widow, Stella, Louis was the only "scholar" Oliver ever took on. Oliver must have seen a bit of himself in the dark-skinned, impoverished child who had minimal training but a good ear that was now in evidence.

In 1918, at age seventeen, Louis married Daisy Parker, whom he met on a job where she was working as a prostitute. During the same year, a huge break for him came when Oliver decided to leave New Orleans for Chicago. Since Armstrong knew all of Oliver's solos and had been hanging around the band, Kid Ory, the band leader, yielded to the opinion of the other band members and, against his initial inclination, decided to give the spot to Louis. The job with Ory gave him broader exposure, and he came to the attention of Fate Marable, who was organizing a band to play on riverboat excursions that departed from the Canal Street dock in the evenings. When, in the spring of 1919, Marable invited Armstrong to move northward with the boat band, which was based in St. Louis for the summer, Armstrong accepted. Life with Daisy was difficult, and he sensed that the boat job would broaden his musical skills.

Over the next few years, he worked on the boats during the long summer season, then picked up gigs in New Orleans during the winters. He thrived in both settings, which demanded very different kinds of music. By the time he left the city for Chicago in 1922, he had achieved a local reputation. His fame was probably not equal to that reached by Oliver before he left in 1918, and it may not have even been at the level of Freddie Keppard or Sidney Bechet, but he was rapidly reaching maturity. In Chicago and New York City during the next few years, his musical gifts would blossom in ways that were instantly recognizable as belonging to New Orleans, even while they moved musical style forward into new territories for jazz solo playing.
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1896 was based on an incident that happened in New Orleans. In spite of its easygoing reputation, the city was not immune to the violent side of white attempts to maintain the myth of racial supremacy. This was the downside of the social situation in which many descendants of slaves found themselves in 1901, the year of his birth.

His mother was one of some forty thousand immigrants who left hundreds of plantations in Louisiana and Mississippi and headed for New Orleans during the last decades of the nineteenth century. They brought with them a culture that had been strongly shaped by legacies from various parts of Africa. In the city, they settled alongside African Americans who had been living there for some time, and they all discovered what they had in common. Something similar had happened in New Orleans during the early decades of the nineteenth century at the famous Place Congo, where as many as six hundred slaves clustered together by tribes, the Minahs, Congos, Mandingos, and Gagas staying apart from one another around the fringe of the performing circle and gradually, over the years, forging a shared African-American culture. By the 1840s the African dances of the old days were gone; they had yielded to African-American hybrids. On slave plantations the same process played out in rituals like the ring shout, where a synthesized African-American religious culture was formed out of disparate African and American traditions.

In New Orleans around 1900, the freedmen and their descendants were discovering common ground at Funky Butt Hall, in storefront churches and in street parades and funerals. These were Armstrong’s early training grounds, places where the musical culture that had been formed during slavery, the African-American musical vernacular, was preserved. The word “vernacular” (from the Latin *verna*, meaning “slave”) carries associations of class; it is everyday music made and appreciated by lower-class people—indeed, enslaved people. And it is mainly music made with no recourse to notation, existing purely in an oral (or aural) tradition. Armstrong lived a childhood of poverty, on the margins of society, and this position put him right in the middle of the vernacular traditions that were fueling the new music of which he would eventually become one of the world’s greatest masters.

What was Armstrong’s relationship to this culture? To how much of it did he remain loyal and how much did he modify as he developed into a professional dance-band musician? Further, and more provocatively, how was his music shaped by the complex social forces surrounding him, the forces of Jim Crow oppression, most obviously, but also of Creole separatism, of a passionate interest in the masculine articulation of dignity, and of the determination of the freedmen to symbolically assert cultural autonomy? These questions guide the present inquiry.

My main thesis is that Armstrong was immersed in the vernacular music that surrounded him much more thoroughly and extensively than biographers have acknowledged. This has remained obscure for several reasons. We are dealing with prehistory in the sense that early jazz made by African Americans from New Orleans was not documented on sound recordings until 1921, a year before Armstrong left the city. The history of any vernacular music is difficult to work with, since the music belongs to an oral tradition and since it is made by people whose lives tend not to be well documented. Armstrong’s image has often been tied up with stereotypes of noble-savage primitivism and God-given talent that is born and not made, but it is more interesting to discover how he was shaped by the musical and social complexities of New Orleans. Many of the people who nurtured him—the “ratty” people, as one Creole of color referred to them—were impoverished, illiterate, and from broken homes. Not only were they confined to the back of the trolley car, like all other African Americans, but also many of them suffered from additional prejudices against people with relatively dark skin, which signified both a history of severe suffering under past structures of white supremacy and the near impossibility of escape from the position of subordination those structures were designed to ensure.

The story of how, out of this milieu, one of the greatest musicians of the twentieth century emerged is uniquely African American and therefore uniquely American. To understand jazz as American in this way is to work with a social conception of the music that is quite different from the familiar story of jazz as an American musical gumbo, a melting pot of many different ethnicities.
This book is not exactly a biography; it is, rather, about one musician's experience of a complex city. To the extent that it is a biography, it is a highly decentered one. The details of Armstrong's experience open up topics relevant not only to his musical development but also to the history of jazz. Thus, the book is organized around the flow of his life, but the discussion often moves laterally, into the larger context.

Armstrong was shaped by total immersion in the central traditions of African-American vernacular music. Furthermore, in New Orleans, and indeed throughout his life, he showed no interest at all in assimilating to white culture. He understood the advantages of seeing the best in people, but he despised those who "put on airs." His sharpest criticisms were directed at Negroes who were "dicy"—African-American slang for someone who pretentiously imitates whites. Eventually he learned how to play many different kinds of music, including music socially marked as white. But it is important to understand his reasons. His interest was partly professional: the more versatility a musician had, the better his options for employment. And it was partly a matter of creative curiosity about materials of sound to which he was exposed. He got from white music what he wanted, what he needed for success and what his sonic curiosity drew him to.

The point is crucial for understanding his musical accomplishment. Like virtually all African-American musicians of his generation and generations long before and long after, he was fully prepared to provide any kind of music a paying audience called for. His goal was not to be like white people; the goal was to get paid by white people. But that was a long-term project. His strength, for a long time into his maturity, was playing to black audiences, and when he did that he foregrounded a distinctively African-American set of stylistic features and values. Had it been otherwise, he would have turned out to be a very different musician.

That he was not interested in cultural assimilation is an indication of psychological security and confidence. It may also be taken as a
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political stance. To insist on the value of vernacular culture and to reject assimilation of white culture was not an idle position to take. There were considerable ideological pressures working in the other direction. The Times-Picayune of New Orleans published an arrogant little bit of social-cultural Darwinism in a 1918 article about what it called the “mansion of the muses.” Melody is said to occupy the great assembly hall; harmony, the sacred inner court; and rhythm, the basement, the servant’s hall, where one hears the “Negro banjo, ragtime and jazz”—“It’s musical value is nil, and its possibilities of harm are great.” Some dicty Negroes undoubtedly agreed. By promoting vernacular practices, Armstrong and people like him asserted a different political position.

Because he was committed to vernacular practices, and for other reasons too, the story of Armstrong’s musical development is shot through with the impact of social experience. And vice versa: music was used to cast and recast social outlook. Music was hardly neutral in a social-political sense; it was not something to be admired in isolation in a concert hall or through a CD player. Armstrong learned music according to various musical-social configurations ranging from the communal nurturing of church members in a Sanctified church to in-your-face dancing in the streets. During the early years of Jim Crow, when vigilante terrorism rose to historically high levels, there were plenty of opportunities for this social-musical dynamic to be inflected in various directions.

Social tension was not the kind of thing that Armstrong and his colleagues spoke about freely, so these conditions must be teased out from their accounts. That the matter is obscure does not diminish its importance. To the contrary, the social uses of music were particularly important in the environment Armstrong grew up in. Some of this richness is revealed by putting under a microscope a biographical moment from 1921, near the end of Armstrong’s time in the city. It is a moment Armstrong, looking back decades later, regarded as a shining triumph. A single parade with the Tuxedo Brass Band gave him the feeling that he had finally arrived at the top in the city of his youth.

CHAPTER ONE

Tuxedo Brass Band, 1921

When I played with the Tuxedo Brass Band I felt just as proud as though I had been hired by John Philip Sousa or Arthur Pryor.

—Louis Armstrong

Isidore Barbarin had a reputation as a dependable marcher, and for a man who spent most of his working hours plastering walls, that was perhaps honor enough to live for. His love for brass bands drove him to find a way, when called upon, to take time off from work and show up promptly, music under control and uniform looking nice. Still, at age forty-nine, even he must have favored certain seasons over others. In autumn—Armstrong tells us only that it was “toward the end of 1921”—the weather in New Orleans can be uncomfortably hot and very wet. The city’s dirt streets were routinely transformed by heavy rains into slogging paths of putrid, sewage-ridden mud. Many musicians hated marching no matter what the weather. Emile Barnes refused to parade unless he owed somebody a personal favor. Hymolite Charles thought that marching had removed a few years from his life. Aaron Clark was convinced that he had contracted what would be his final illness from marching; his dying request was that his son never become a musician. Walter Blue Robertson actually did die in a parade, as did a few other musicians whose identities have faded into the mist. Piled on to fears of parade-induced illness was the objection that parades were plagued by violence from onlookers.
New Orleans, 1924 (New Orleans Public Library)

1. Jane Alley, Armstrong's birthplace
2. Liberty and Perido streets, where Armstrong grew up
3. Canal Street
4. The French Quarter
5. Storyville
6. Tulane University
7. Lincoln and Johnson Parks
8. Colored Waif's Home for Boys
9. Lake resorts
dark-skin may have caused Isidore a moment of hesitation, he probably recognized and appreciated a mutual enthusiasm for marching. By this time, Armstrong had played in some fancy places—at the New Orleans Country Club and most recently at Tom Anderson’s, where the money was very good indeed. Nevertheless, he shared this pleasure with Isidore Barbarin, with whom he did not share very much else. For him, there was no greater happiness than marching in a parade. “I really felt that I was somebody,” Armstrong wrote thirty-two years later. “When I played with the Tuxedo Brass Band I felt just as proud as though I had been hired by John Philip Sousa or Arthur Pryor.”

Perhaps you marched in a parade band when you were young. Probably you enjoyed it, but it is unlikely that you remember the event as one of the musical highlights of your life. When Armstrong reflected back on this moment, he was fifty-two years old and sitting on top of the most successful career jazz had ever known. So it is something to think about, this parade and why it meant so much to him.

**Free to Move**

A parade is, by definition, a performance that moves through a public space. For Armstrong and his community, such an event carried special significance. With his 1921 success with the Tuxedo Brass Band, Armstrong believed that he had solved, through his growing musical ability, the problem of trouble-free movement through a dangerous city.

It was not uncommon during these times for people with dark skin to be harassed when they walked through unfamiliar parts of virtually any town in the United States. But wasn’t New Orleans different? From the start there was greater tolerance, more integration, and less restriction than perhaps anywhere else in the South. New Orleans had slavery and all the brutality that went with it, but in its early years the city gained a reputation for relatively relaxed racial relations. That changed when Americans started to arrive in large numbers after the purchase of the Louisiana Territory in 1803, bringing with them a more vehement attitude of rigid exclusion.
The Civil War intensified the threat. In 1865 a defeated Confederate soldier returning to New Orleans described his vengeful mood: “I hope the day will come when we will have the upper hand of those black scoundrels and we will have no mercy for them we will kill them like dogs. I was never down on a nigger as I am now.” New Orleanians today will tell you that there has always been tolerance, and maybe that has been true in a quirky, individual way. But it has not been true uniformly, and for someone like Armstrong part of life’s challenge was learning how to deal with the problems that came from being dark-skinned, poor, and disfranchised.

In 1921, the most notorious incident in anyone’s memory was the July 1900 shootout and riot involving Robert Charles. Charles was an admirer of Bishop Henry Turner’s back-to-Africa movement, and he had learned during his youth in Mississippi the utility of a gun in the face of lawless, racially charged violence. The catastrophe in New Orleans started when Charles was visiting someone in an unfamiliar part of town. Questioned why he was there by an intimidating policeman, Charles drew his revolver and fired.

Fleeing to a second-floor apartment barely ten blocks from the neighborhood where Armstrong grew up, Charles relied on a Winchester rifle and a stockpile of bullets, homemade with his portable furnace, to fend off a huge mob of white citizens. Before they killed him, he shot twenty-seven people. In response to his one-man insurrection, three thousand whites produced twelve hours of indiscriminate rioting, burning, beatings, and killing throughout African-American neighborhoods. All of this happened barely a year before Armstrong was born. A commemorative song circulated, but, as Jelly Roll Morton pointed out, it was wise to forget the song “in order to get along with the world on the peaceful side.” It did not take citywide rioting to make African Americans aware of the unwritten laws governing their movement, but the event certainly stood as an enduring emblem of what those laws were all about.

Another terrorizing occasion was the defeat of the boxer Jim Jeffries—known as the “Great White Hope”—by the Negro Jack Johnson on July 4, 1910. Johnson’s victory caused white rioting throughout the country, and New Orleans was no exception. Armstrong remembered hiding in his house while gangs wandered through the neighborhood in search of random targets on whom to release their rage. Such was the New Orleans into which Louis Armstrong was born.

These events did not trouble lighter-skinned Creoles in the same way. Guitarist Louis Keppard was asked in the 1950s if his father had been threatened during the Robert Charles riots. He answered no, that his father “could pass around the streets,” that he wouldn’t be bothered because he was Creole and “kind of bright” (“bright” meaning light-skinned). For a Creole like Isidore Barbarin (b. 1872), the threat of racial violence was apparently remote. Asked to reminisce about his childhood, Barbarin recalled, “I didn’t know I was colored until, I mean, well later years—I didn’t know I was colored.” That statement speaks volumes about the different experiences of Creoles and Negroes like Armstrong. For there was never a time when Armstrong or any member of his family did not know that he or she was colored.
His first experience of what it meant to be colored was sharply etched in his memory. It came with his first ride in a trolley car, in 1906 at age five. Accompanied by an adult friend of the family, the five-year-old boarded the trolley and decided to play a game. Instead of sitting with his guardian, he moved to the opposite end of the car, straight past the sign—which he could not read, of course—that marked the boundary of racial seating. He never forgot his guardian’s panic as she seized him and dragged him back. She was so frightened, he remembered, that she “turned colors” (pun intended), and cursed him, “SIT DOWN DAMMIT.” Here was the child’s first taste of the institutional guarantee of disadvantage that he would live with, in one form or another, for the rest of his life. In his guardian’s panic he got a glimpse of how terror reinforced the legal side of Jim Crow.

He wrote about several incidents that occurred during his teenage years, when walking through unfamiliar sections of the city was tinged with danger. At age seventeen he took a job across the river in Gretna that required him to return home very late. The scene made him apprehensive: “Just a few drunks, white and colored... Lots of times, the both races, looked like they were going to get into a scrap, even just nothing much... And down there, with something like that happening, with just a few ‘Spades’ (colored folks) around, it wasn’t so good... Even if the colored are in the right—when the cops arrive, they’ll whip your head, and then, ask questions.” Two years later his wife Daisy took a job with a white family who provided the couple with a small apartment behind the main house. The first night that he returned home late after a gig, Louis was terrified he would not be able to explain his presence to the “watchman.” Daisy gave notice the next morning and the couple promptly moved.

Armstrong was not given to dwelling on social problems, and he rarely mentioned them in public. But near the end of his life he wrote the bluntest possible account of racial relations in New Orleans, confirming that the intense hatred held by the returning Confederate veteran remained an active force:

At ten years old I could see—the Bluffings that those Old Fat Belly Stinking very Smelly Dirty White Folks were putting Down. It seemed as though the only thing they cared about was their Shot Guns or those Old time Shot Guns which they had strapped around them. So they get full of their Mint Julep or that bad whisky; the poor white trash were Guzzling down, like water, then when they get so Damn Drunk until they’d go out of their minds—then it’s Nigger Hunting time. Any Nigger. They wouldn’t give up until they would find one. From then on, Lord have mercy on the poor Darkie. Then they would Torture the poor Darkie, as innocent as he may be. Then they would get their usual Ignorant Bored Cat laughs before they would shoot him down—like a Dog. My my my, those were the days.

One of his youthful passions was second lining, the practice of following a parade as it made its route through the city. Second-line gangs carried homemade weapons—“drum sticks, baseball bats, and all forms of ammunition we’d call it to combat some of the foe when they come to the dividing line,” according to Jelly Roll Morton. It was while second lining that Armstrong learned all about foes and dividing lines. The Irish Channel, uptown and near the river, was notoriously hostile to Negroes who did not live there; “if you followed a parade out there you might come home with your head in your hand,” he wrote. Creole neighborhoods also marked their boundaries efficiently. Many Creoles were forbidden to second line due to the violence regularly associated with it. Benny Williams, a parade drummer universally known as “Black Benny,” was sought after not only for his musical skill but also for his ability to match blow for blow with a heavy blackjack that he pulled out when necessary. “Nobody would do us nothing,” said bass player Ed Garland. “He used to take care of us.” Armstrong figured out a less dangerous way of dealing with the problem. If he could gain the privilege of carrying the horn of Willie “Bunk” Johnson, Joe Oliver, or some other cornetist, neither the police nor neighborhood toughs would bother him. By performing this little service, the unsupervised child could stay with the band on its entire route. Later, in his mid-teens as a hired cornetist, he was known to break away from his parade steps in order to chase down and flail hecklers.

Freedom of movement was a rare privilege that ante-bellum slaves had cherished highly. Beyond a small handful of yearly holidays, a
slave could visit a neighboring plantation only when his master allowed; more daringly, he could break the law and make a visit without permission. After Reconstruction, whites adapted earlier techniques for repressing movement. Similarly, so did the freedmen and their descendants bring to New Orleans a sense of pleasure in being able to move freely from one place to another. With his 1921 march with the Tuxedo Brass Band, Armstrong felt that his musical ability had granted him a passport for safe passage throughout the city.

Within his community, that was a notable triumph. Black Benny was "the only man, musician or not, who dared to go anywhere, whether it was the Irish Channel, Back O'Town, the Creole section in the Seventh Ward or any other tough place," he wrote. "He was not afraid of a living soul." Guitarist Danny Barker described Black Benny as "six foot six inches, 200 pounds of primitive African prime manhood" (a description that says as much about Barker, a Creole, as it says about Williams). What made movement difficult for Williams and Armstrong was the dark complexion of their skin. Joe Oliver, Armstrong's mentor, experienced the same problem. Jelly Roll Morton's taunting nickname for Oliver was "Blondie." But in Armstrong's mind the 1921 parade had solved the problem for him. "I too could go into any part of New Orleans without being bothered," he wrote. "Everybody loved me and just wanted to hear me blow, even the tough characters were no exception. The tougher they were the more they would fall in love with my horn." First, the child gained mobility through the protection of adult musicians, by carrying their horns; later, he learned how to fight and rely on strong allies; finally, he earned the reward of unmolested passage thanks to his musical skill. As jazz fanned out across the country, more than a few musicians were drawn to the profession because it brought them that same opportunity. When Armstrong left New Orleans in 1922, he started traveling on a grand scale, and in a sense he never stopped until his very last years in Queens, New York.

On one level, a parade through unfamiliar territory stands as a symbolic victory: it accomplishes the goal of unrestricted motion while preserving the "real" status quo, the otherwise rigidly enforced restrictions. But the parade is more than symbolic because it moves through the actual battlegrounds of class conflict. And it is also structured as a moment for asserting cultural autonomy, to literally broadcast vernacular culture over the entire city, through the hostile Irish Channel and the Creole Seventh Ward, through the blood-stained streets of the Robert Charles riots, the very streets where fat-bellied, stinking white folks hunted down targets of revenge after Jim Johnson's victory and where Jim Crow laws scripted the performance of a social structure of subservience and exploitation by requiring rear seating in trolleys.

Late in his life Armstrong grew fond of the idea that his music was capable of dissolving racially charged violence. He remembered a 1948 performance for an integrated audience in Miami: "I walked on stage and there I saw something I thought I'd never see. I saw thousands of people, colored and white on the main floor. Not segregated in one row of whites and another row of Negroses... These same society people may go around the corner and lynch a Negro. But while they're listening to our music, they don't think about trouble. What's more they're watching Negro and white musicians play side by side. And we bring contentment and pleasure. I always say, 'Look at the nice taste we leave. It's bound to mean something. That's what music is for.'" His feeling that music issues an antidote to violence appears to have had its origins in New Orleans.

Yet that was largely a conceit, a comforting hornily to be called on when needed. More salient were the many incidents when the threat of racist violence intruded on his music, literally surrounding it and shaping many career decisions. Though it pleased him to look out from a stage and see smiling white folks, he may never have completely left behind his internalized fear of white violence. What sociologist John Dollard wrote in the 1930s certainly held for Armstrong: "Every Negro in the South knows that he is under a kind of sentence of death; he does not know when his turn will come, it may never come, but it may also be any time." After he moved in 1922 to Chicago, where there was a degree of racial mixing and also an increasingly assertive self-image among African Americans, he remained shy and deferential. White musicians idol-
ized him. They gathered around the bandstand to admire his brilliantly spun licks, and they gradually got to know him. Eventually they invited him to a party. He accepted the invitation; nevertheless, when he arrived he could not be persuaded to leave the kitchen.

Music in the Open Air

The value Armstrong placed on unrestricted movement is linked to another reason why he remembered this 1921 parade with the Tuxedo Brass Band so fondly: the most important venues for music, for him and the people he grew up with, were located outdoors rather than indoors. Today we appreciate his musical legacy in our homes, on the CD player, or perhaps on television. The tradition of jazz that flowed out of New Orleans came to be performed in venues that imitate, to one degree or another, the European model of classical music in the concert hall, which in turn imitates the contemplative atmosphere of church worship in the West. Indoor music stands at the top of our pyramid of values, street music on the bottom. In the New Orleans of Armstrong's youth this relationship was turned on its head.

A cabaret has walls that limit the size of the audience, which must pay to listen; the audience for street music is unlimited and the music is free. To a child growing up in poverty this made all the difference. With the exception of church, most of Armstrong's early musical influences were absorbed outdoors, on the streets every day. Men collecting junk for recycling played blues on tin horns, and bands played on advertising wagons and in parades. As he wandered around town, he could even listen to music from dance halls and honky tonsks as it freely flowed through open windows and cracks in the walls. If violence provided the brutal push, the barrier to free movement, then music provided the seductive pull. Violence and music were thus paired as opposing forces of repulsion and attraction ripping through the vertical organization of society.

Music outdoors was always interactive. Parades are the famous example. Louis rarely saw his father when he was growing up, but he sometimes watched him perform as the grand marshal in parades. "All the chicks would swoon when he'd pass by with his high hat, tails, and a long beautiful streamer hanging down by his side," he wrote. "It would just send me to watch my dad, sort of, put his hand towards the middle of those streamers, and casually hold it (a little) as he would strut like a Peacock." Marchers in the second line interacted with the grand marshal, with the music of the band, and with each other. In the famous New Orleanian "funeral with music" the band played hymns, slowly with grief on the way to the cemetery while the community of mourners sang along. On the celebratory return, they played up-tempo ragtime, spiking the crowds in number and excitement.

Jessie Charles, a Methodist unsympathetic to extroverted styles of worship, described the scene: "Second line—that's the life of the parade and a funeral... Dancing in Sanctified Churches is like the second line. The Baptists do a shout." The ring shout was the most important religious-musical ritual during the period of slavery, and Charles is recognizing its lingering importance in New Orleans. A slow, shuffling circle dance, with clapping and singing in call and response between soloists and the group, the ring shout may well have been the central arena where slave culture was born as a synthesis of disparate African and American traditions. It was based on the many circle-dance traditions of West Africa and performed with an intense focus on musical-kinetic interaction. The practice was designed to bring out emotions in ecstatic, communal display. It promoted a style of spiritual engagement that continued to mark religious practice among Baptists and the newly found Sanctified sects. In New Orleans, second lining brought the ecstatic behavior of the ring shout into the streets. One New Orleanian musician put a nice finish on this church analogy when he said how important it is to look nice in a parade because "you gonna have a congregation of people lookin' at you."

Parades thus offered disfranchised Negroes a chance to assertively move their culture through the city's public spaces, the very spaces where African Americans were expected to confirm social inferiority by sitting in the rear of trolley cars and by stepping aside on sidewalks to allow whites to pass. In many parts of the South after the Civil War, African Americans had chosen to demonstrate subversive rudeness instead—brushing shoulders on the sidewalk, for example, or
context is therefore fundamentally different from that of European art music, in which "art" is conceived in isolation, by the cloistered composer, for the equally isolated, imaginative interpretation of every member of the art-hall audience. That model makes no sense in Louis Armstrong's New Orleans, where the "artist" is a public performer who thrives on direct visual and aural interaction. These dimensions of cultural practice did not survive the Great Migration of jazz out of New Orleans to points north, east, and west. Or at least they did not survive in precisely the same form. Armstrong, as much as anyone, would be responsible for changing the music and the terms of its reception. But before he left New Orleans he received his greatest recognition in the open-air space of immediate and public interaction.

It was not just whites who were targeted in public displays of symbolic resistance. Manuel Perez, an old-line Creole, was disgusted by the intensity of the second line: "Lots of people dancing, misbehaving, it drove him out of music," said Hypolite Charles. Danny Barker told a similar story about Chris Kelly, a cornetist born on the Magnolia Plantation downriver, who "played for those blues, cotton-picking Negroes, what they called in the old days 'yard and field Negroes' who worked in the fields, worked hard. When he would play a street parade, mostly advertising, all the kitchen mechanics would come out on the corner, shaking. The Creoles would hate to see that." Armstrong wrote about a parade from around 1918 when he, Kid Ory, and a few other improvising musicians were hired to supplement a band of Creoles led by John Robichaux. Subtly but surely, the Creoles made known their sense of superiority, causing Armstrong to turn to Ory and wonder, "You dig what I'm digging?"

According to Armstrong's memory, the Creole arrogance dissolved when he and Ory swung the band so beautifully on the uptempo return from burial that the second line demanded an encore. He viewed that moment as a social and musical victory: "We proved to them that any learned musician can read music, but they all can't swing ... Nice lesson for them." This publicly issued lesson brings us to what was probably a third reason for Armstrong's treasured memory from 1921: in that parade he achieved friendship and respect from the old-school Creoles, perhaps for the first time.
Color and the Creoles

The earliest surviving document written by Armstrong is a letter he wrote from Chicago dated September 1, 1922. He had just arrived from New Orleans in August, and he was already busy writing to his friends back home. This letter is addressed to “Mr. Barbarin, Dear Friend”—that is, Isidore Barbarin, the peck-horn player in the Tuxedo Brass Band. Armstrong reaffirms their mutual fondness for marching: “The boys [in Chicago] give me H . . . all the Time because [I’m] forever talking about the Brass Band . . . They say I don’t see how a man can be crazy about those hard parades.” It is clear that the two had established a friendship. Given Barbarin’s social and musical biases and Armstrong’s background, this is noteworthy, for Barbarin was a downtown Creole, Armstrong an uptown Negro. In musical circles of the time those labels of social distinction carried tremendous weight.

Like most cities in the United States, different sections of New Orleans have been historically associated with different ethnic groups. Since 1836, when the city was partitioned into three municipalities, Canal Street has provided the central boundary of this kind. The original French settlers located their village—the area now known as the French Quarter—on a sharp bend in the Mississippi River that gave them a good view of trouble approaching from either direction. Because of this and other riverbends, the city cannot be negotiated with a compass; the streets spin out in directions that are rarely north, south, east, or west. Canal Street became the main point of orientation. Still today, residents speak of the downriver side of Canal Street, beginning with the French Quarter, as “downtown,” and the upriver side as “uptown.” But the boundary of Canal Street was much more than a point of orientation. Beginning with the 1836 partitions, the uptown side was also called the “American section,” and downtown the “French section.” These terms were used by musicians from our period, and these basic geographic-demographic facts of the city were part of the social texture that played such a huge role in the history of early jazz.

The downtown population that concerns us—because it is the population that concerned Armstrong—is the group of people who had mixed ancestry, French and African. Armstrong knew them simply as “Creoles”; at times they have also been called “Creoles of color.” Creoles were French-speaking Catholics. They controlled superb traditions of musical pedagogy, deriving from the French Opera House and ultimately from the Paris Conservatoire, at a level that is very hard to find in the United States today. They also embraced the American fondness for brass bands. Out of their numbers came a few musicians who gained national attention, including Arnold Metoyer, with whom Armstrong played during his last few years in New Orleans.

On the other side of Canal Street, the uptown “American” side, the last decades of the nineteenth century brought continual social flux. Yankee immigrants had been arriving in huge numbers since the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 and they continued to come; so did the Germans and the Irish. As the turn of the century approached, these groups were joined by alarming numbers of Italians and Jews. Even more alarming was the massive influx of freedmen and their descendants arriving from the rural plantations of Louisiana and Mississippi. This was Armstrong’s group. Creoles were wary of these plantation immigrants. As they watched them arrive in imposing numbers, the Creoles asserted a multidimensional sense of cultural difference. They produced a package of social barriers that Armstrong was forced to deal with if he wanted to advance musically.

As Danny Barker’s description of Black Benny Williams—“six foot six inches, 200 pounds of primitive African prime manhood”—indicates, the Creole sense of difference included appearance. Barker belonged to a younger generation, and he does not usually reveal the Creole snobbishness that typically marks the generation of his grandfather, Isidore Barbarin. The fact is that people on both sides of Canal Street routinely thought about people in terms of relative lightness and darkness of skin color. Perhaps you did not think that the infinitely varied shadings of skin color mattered so much within the African-American population, with everyone thrown into the same miserable boat named Jim Crow—especially within
the African-American population of New Orleans, with its legendary tolerance and social relaxation. Unfortunately, it did matter. In New Orleans, perhaps even more than most places in the United States, differences in skin color were constantly noticed and regarded as primary markers of social difference.

The following sampling of descriptions of some of Armstrong’s contemporaries, most of them from Armstrong himself (others are so identified), highlights the period’s sense of shaded distinctions:

**Black Benny Williams**: “a very much good looking, real smooth black, young man”

**Joe Oliver**: “There are three kinds of blacks: A black, a lamb black, and a damn black. I’m black and I only seen two other damn people in the world blacker’n me” (Oliver describing himself)

**Captain “Sore” Dick** (policeman): “short, not too stout jet black guy, built like a brick house”

**Isaiah Hubbard**: “a real black man, with thick mustache, carried a pistol”

**Henry Zeno** (drummer): “a little short, dark, sharp cat”

**“Snow”** (criminal in Armstrong’s neighborhood): “a real dark character”

**Nicodemus** (a “character who had me spellbound through my years in the third ward”): “jet black”

**Tony Jackson**: “real dark and not a bit good looking” (Jelly Roll Morton)

**Clerk Wade** (“sharpest Pimp that New Orleans ever had”): “good-looking, tall dark and handsome guy... He had a very nice smile... He was a real dark brown skin young man—who kept his hair cut real close (Konk wasn’t known in those days). Clerk wore the very best of clothes and he also had diamonds in his garters for his socks”

**Leontine Richardson** (daughter of Armstrong’s cousin): “a nice looking brown skin gal... a little on the short side”

**Buddy Bolden**: “brown, not dark” (Kid Ory)

**Arthur Brown** (neighborhood boy dead at age fifteen): “a very much, good looking boy, with the prettiest brown skin (light brown)”

**Nelly Williams** (Black Benny’s wife): “a real short, good looking, light skinned colored gal”

**Lorenzo Tio**: “straight black hair and a copper-colored complexion” (Barney Bigard)

**Morris Moore**: “A tall, real light skin’d fellow, very much good-looking”

**Isaac Smooth**: “Goodlooking light skinned boy”

**Mrs. Martin** (caretaker of the neighborhood school) and her “three beautiful daughters, Orleania, Alice, and Wilhelmenia”: “all were real light skinned... On the same order of the Creole type.”

**John Cootay** (husband of Alice Martin): “He could easily pass for a white boy... But he couldn’t be bothered”

**Dave Perkins** (musician and possible teacher of Joe Oliver): “very light, like a white fellow” (Warren “Baby” Dodds)

**John Robicheaux**: “could easily have ‘passed’ for Caucasian” (Edmond Souchon)

Armstrong’s description of his fourth and last wife, Lucille, helps to round out his reading of the color chart: “When I first saw her the glow of her deep-brown skin got me deep down. When we first met, she was dancing in the line at the old Cotton Club and was the darkest girl in the line... I suppose I’m partial to brown and dark-skinned women, anyhow. None of my four wives was a light-colored woman.”

The event of the dark-skinned Armstrong playing alongside light-skinned Creoles like Barbarin in the Tuxedo Brass Band must be understood in a context where racial appearance and cultural practice were not necessarily separated in people’s minds. Musicians in New Orleans, like most Americans of the time, conflated the two unless they had a good reason to think otherwise. When Creole musicians looked at Armstrong, they saw racial markers and thought about a whole set of cultural differences. We know a little bit about Barbarin’s own biases from his grandson Danny Barker, and they are not surprising, given what we know about other Creoles of Barbarin’s generation. “Isidore referred to musicians who played jazz music in the many six-piece jazz bands
about the city as 'routine' musicians," wrote Barker. "It was a slur. To him, 'routine' meant playing by ear, with no music, in the now 'classic' jazz pattern: melody, then variations on a theme... I heard Isidore once say of [Buddy] Bolden, 'Sure, I heard him. I knew him. He was famous with the ratty people.' I soon learned what ratty people, ratty joints and dives meant: it meant good-time people, earthy people, who frequent anywhere there's a good time... So, ratty music is bluesy, folksy music that moves you and exhilarates you, makes you dance."

So another good reason for Armstrong's strong feelings about his 1921 appearance with the Tuxedo Brass Band would be his successful integration with downtown Creoles. Not just any Creoles, but the older generation like Barbarin, who embraced Eurocentric musical standards and scorned everything else. One does not have to read too deeply between the lines to understand who the ratty people were: they were poor and uneducated, direct descendants from slaves, recent arrivals from the rural plantations, often with dark skin and holding cultural values that were distinctly not Eurocentric. Armstrong was very much a product of the culture Barbarin disdained. "Bluesy, folksy music that moves you and exhilarates you, makes you dance"—that was the kind of music he grew up with, day in and day out.

Before 1921, Armstrong's contact with Creoles seems to have been slight, though he did have some professional acquaintances and even some friendships. But now he found himself alongside established figures in the downtown tradition. William "Bebé" Ridgley and Oscar "Papa" Celestin were not at all Creoles but immigrants from the plantations to uptown New Orleans ("We were both country boys," Ridgley said). In 1917 they formed the Tuxedo Brass Band and the Tuxedo Dance Band with the aim of competing for the very best jobs. Celestin joined several fraternal clubs with an eye toward using his contacts to land jobs, and Ridgley opened up a line of work by befriending a "white gentleman named Sim Black who was Scoutmaster for Boy Scout Troop 13." Together they booked their bands "almost everywhere in the city of New Orleans and the state of Louisiana that a colored band could go," said Ridgley. Their success allowed them to hire some of the old-school Creoles like Barbarin and Alphonse Picou, thus producing an "integrated band," with members from both sides of Canal Street.

On the day of his remembered march, Armstrong was greeted by Papa Celestin's warm welcome and also a bit of caution. This was the first time he had ever seen a lyre for holding notated music, and Celestin worried about his ability to read the music. Armstrong took this in the best way: "That was a good deal of encouragement for a young fellow without too much brass band experience." His first fully professional position, a couple of years earlier, was with Kid Ory's nonreading band, surely an exemplar of Barbarin's idea of ratty and routine. Drummer Warren "Baby" Dodds said that "the [uptown and downtown] musicians mixed only if you were good enough." Armstrong had become good enough by 1921.

What makes the history of early jazz so rich is the need to parse "good" according to two different standards of valuation—one for downtown Creoles, the other for uptown Negroes. Downtown, "good" meant precise intonation, a round and full timbre, and the ability to read music fluently. Just a couple of years earlier, Armstrong had been so intimidated by the idea of playing with a good reading band that he drank himself sick with cheap wine. But his note-reading skills, as well as other dimensions of his cornet technique, had advanced considerably during the intervening years, thanks mainly to his jobs on the riverboats beginning in 1918 and running intermittently for the rest of his time in the city.

The standard of "good enough" cultivated in Armstrong's uptown circles constitutes one of the main topics of this book. Canal Street is very wide, and the cultural gap it represented was wider still. It must have been clear to Barbarin and everyone else how far Armstrong had come by the autumn of 1921. What he brought to the Tuxedo Brass Band and eventually to the world was the product of years of tutoring in a musical culture that has not been well understood. It was a culture based on blues, on communal singing in church, and on the string-band tradition of ragging tunes. It held a special place for improvisation. Its skills emerged from a set of values and practices quite different from those fostered by Eurocentric
practices. It was a culture that consciously extended practices formed during slavery, in secret in the woods or in public for the benefit of the planters. A culture that, in sum, carried a strong African legacy.

The social dimensions of Armstrong's experience were both restrictive and liberating, as they always are for artists, but with a special twist for a dark-skinned child living in poverty during one of the most violently oppressive periods in the nation's history. There were comforts in life, music being the strongest of them all. Armstrong had the good fortune to grow up among people who granted music a prominent place, music of any kind, but especially music that had some direct social purpose and especially music that had soul.

CHAPTER TWO

The Saints

It all came from the Old Sanctified Churches.
—Louis Armstrong

Everybody in there sang and they clapped and stomped their feet and sang with their whole bodies. They had beat, a powerful beat, a rhythm we held on to from slavery days, and their music was so strong and expressive it used to bring tears to my eyes.
—Mahalia Jackson on the Sanctified Church

When Armstrong was asked late in life about his religious beliefs, he responded, “I'm a Baptist and a good friend of the Pope's and I always wear a Jewish star a friend gave me for luck.” This clever answer communicates on several levels. Behind it lies the fact that Armstrong was exposed to all three religions—Baptist, Catholic, and Judaism—during his childhood. Only his experience with Baptists—along with the collection of sects that will be referred to here as “Sanctified” and whose members are known as “Saints”—had a fundamental and lasting impact, however.

Catholicism came first. Sponsored by his paternal great-grandmother, Catherine Walker, Louis was baptized at the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church on August 25, 1901, three weeks after his birth. It would be a mistake to place much emphasis on these Catholic connections. In New Orleans during his youth, Armstrong's name was pronounced “Lewis” rather than “Louie,” contrary to his national reputation; as his widow Lucille wryly observed, “He wasn't French,” and we have already glimpsed the implications of that distinction. In spite of Walker's commitment to Catholicism, her daughter Josephine does not appear to have continued the faith. The boy lived with Josephine for the first five years