



# Jazz Funerals

*Death's Lessons on Leading an Ethical Life in Black New Orleans*

Julia Okun

## ***Jazz Funeral***

*As they cut the body loose,  
he whose footsteps falter  
can no longer keep time  
to the staccato rain  
or the umbrella's tarantella.  
Our pulse is the drumbeat;  
the brass-band—the sun—  
in this city that plans  
all its celebrations  
under the sky,  
taunting Jupiter.*

*-Maxine Cassin<sup>1</sup>*

## **The Jazz Funeral**

Musicological scholar Ardencie Hall once wrote that “[f]unerals everywhere are indicators of the worldview of the participating group.”<sup>2</sup> Death is a moment of acute vulnerability, and much is revealed in how people respond to pain. For the black community of New Orleans, a conscious choice was made to greet death with festivity. Since the late 1800s, they have honored their dead with a brass band procession commonly referred to as a jazz funeral, in which a large cohort of musicians and a “second line” of dancers lead family and friends, as well as unrelated community members, in a musical journey to and from the burial site.<sup>3</sup> A great deal can be understood about the black community of New Orleans through a careful analysis of their singular funerary tradition.

Jazz funerals consist of multiple musical and ritualistic phases. Dirge music, typically done at a slow 4/4 tempo, is first played as the body of the deceased and their immediate

---

<sup>1</sup> Maxine Cassin, “Three Love Poems by a Native,” *Callaloo* 29.4 (2006): 1033–1034.

<sup>2</sup> Ardencie Hall, “New Orleans Jazz Funerals: Transition to the Ancestors” (PhD diss., New York University, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Atkins, “Class Acts and Daredevils: Black Masculinity in Jazz Funeral Dancing,” *The Journal of American Culture* 35.2 (2012): 166–80.

relations march from the church to the gravesite.<sup>4</sup> After the ceremony is performed, the body is “cut loose.”<sup>5</sup> Signaled musically by a rolling of the drums, this is the climactic moment at which the body is released from the world of the living to a Christian afterlife.<sup>6</sup> After the body is “cut loose,” the funeral attendees—the “first line”—are joined by community members—the “second line”—as they march through the streets of New Orleans, accompanied by upbeat jazz tunes played in a highly improvisatory fashion.<sup>7</sup> During this phase, a grand marshal, or “Norman,” leads the parade in a dancing processional that visits favorite sites of the deceased, including bars and childhood homes.<sup>8</sup>

While funerary rituals commemorate the deceased, they transmit important messages about what it means to lead an ethical life through their approach to death. Half of the jazz funeral is performed after the body of the deceased is “cut loose,” highlighting the importance of the tradition for the living community. By examining both the historical and the musico-performative aspects of jazz funerals within the framework of feminist care ethics and Yoruba ethics, this paper argues that the jazz funeral tradition of New Orleans promotes an ethics of communal obligation and uses death to reinforce the relational power of the living. It seeks to demonstrate how jazz funerals at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century worked within a very particular cultural climate and historical lineage to promote an ethics of care within the black community in New Orleans. And while the practice has continued in some form to this day, this paper seeks to look historically at the tradition during the height of its practice.

---

<sup>4</sup> Atkins, “Class Acts and Daredevils,” 166-80.

<sup>5</sup> Marian Gray Secundy, “Coping with Words and Song: The New Orleans Jazz Funeral,” *Literature and Medicine* 8 (1989): 100-105, doi: 10.1353/lm.2011.0087.

<sup>6</sup> Hall, “New Orleans Jazz Funerals.”

<sup>7</sup> Hall, “New Orleans Jazz Funerals.”

<sup>8</sup> Sybil Kein, “The Celebration of Life in New Orleans Jazz Funerals,” *Revue Française d'Études Américaines* 51 (1992): 19–26.

## **Ethical Frameworks: Feminist Care Ethics and African Ethics**

Scholarship exists on the musical, performative, and cultural contributions of jazz funerals. Yet absent from the literature on this rich tradition is an examination of the ethical work that jazz funerals perform. Normative ethics is a branch of philosophy concerned with how people act. It examines the obligations people have, what types of actions promote human flourishing, how people find happiness, and what constitutes a good life. On the surface, it may seem counterintuitive to use ethics as a framework for analyzing jazz funerals—ethics is concerned with life, and funerals with death. Yet jazz funerals do important work in promoting a specific way of living, and thus they perform ethical work. There are numerous branches of normative ethics, but this paper seeks to examine jazz funerals through the complementary lenses of care ethics and African ethics. It is important to provide a brief description of both schools of thought before employing them in an applied analysis.

Care ethics is a branch of normative ethics that emerged in the 1980s as a feminist response to dominant forms of Kantian ethics.<sup>9</sup> Whereas Kantian ethics promotes individual autonomy and universal principles of morality, care ethics teaches that individuals can lead an ethical life by engaging in caring relations with others.<sup>10</sup> Also known as relational ethics, this branch of philosophy stresses the importance of caring for others not as an individual virtue, but as a form of communal responsibility.<sup>11</sup> Writing on the notion of relational obligation, Carol Gilligan, one of the pioneers of feminist care ethics, posited that there is in fact no “separate

---

<sup>9</sup> Nel Noddings, "The Language of Care Ethics," *Knowledge Quest; Chicago* 40.5 (2012): 52-56.

<sup>10</sup> Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Noddings, "The Language of Care Ethics," 52-56.

self.”<sup>12</sup> Rather, individuals exist only within the framework of their relationships and the inter-dependency inherent in those bonds.<sup>13</sup>

Care ethics not only mandates a form of relational obligation in individual interactions, it promotes a larger sense of community by de-emphasizing individual autonomy and highlighting the importance of inter-dependency.<sup>14</sup> Another foundational voice in feminist care ethics is Nel Noddings, who wrote that engaging in caring relationships leads to “motivational displacement,” or a shift in attention from one’s own concerns to those of the people they care for.<sup>15</sup> This radical alteration of perspective in turn acts as a check on engrained solipsism and encourages collaboration and mutual aid.

While care ethics will be an important perspective to reference in an analysis of jazz funerals, it is important to place these theories in connection to African ethics, and Yoruba ethics in particular.<sup>16</sup> Not only are care ethics and African ethics complementary philosophies, but jazz funerals are the product of a diasporic tradition that traces its roots to the Yoruba community in West Africa, and thus a careful analysis of the ethics of jazz funerals would be insufficient if confined exclusively to the Western lens of feminist care ethics. African ethics, and Yoruba ethics in particular, is highly communalistic and grounded in the notion that individual will must be subsumed by the communal good.<sup>17</sup> The primary goal of all individual members of a society

---

<sup>12</sup> Carol Gilligan, "Hearing the Difference: Theorizing Connection," *Hypatia* 10.2 (1995): 122.

<sup>13</sup> Gilligan, "Hearing the Difference," 120-127.

<sup>14</sup> Held, *The Ethics of Care*.

<sup>15</sup> Noddings, "The Language of Care Ethics," 52-56.

<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that the phrase “African ethics” is used throughout philosophical literature and thus is what I have been forced to rely on in my research and writing. I recognize the arbitrary flattening of African communities and cultures inherent in the term and seek to combat this by paying specific attention to nuances of Yoruba ethics within this larger framework.

<sup>17</sup> John Ayotunde Isola Bewaji, "Ethics and Morality in Yoruba Culture," in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu. (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 396-403.

is to make their community flourish.<sup>18</sup> This is underscored by the fact that African philosophy defines personhood according to one's place in society—a direct challenge to Kantian notions of rational autonomy.<sup>19</sup>

Notions of communal obligation are compatible with Western care ethics, but there is an explicit textual connection between African ethics and care ethics, as well. Writing on the principles of African philosophy, Polycarp Ikuenobe says that “[t]he community is care-oriented because people have the responsibility to care about others and to provide the goods and the environment that will help individuals achieve personhood.”<sup>20</sup> Thus African philosophy predates care ethics in many ways by articulating that members of society have a moral duty to engage in caring relationships within their communities, and that this sense of connectivity is the wellspring of individual responsibility.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Historical Lineage of Promoting Care**

The ethical work that jazz funerals performed at the turn of the 20th century can be rooted back to various funerary traditions and community organizations that created a cultural tendency towards care. New Orleans' black community has a singular history. The majority of its residents were brought to America as slaves from a consolidated region of West African known as Senegambia, home to the Yoruba and Dahomey peoples.<sup>22</sup> This uniformity of lineage combined with a French colonial regime that granted significant cultural autonomy to its

---

<sup>18</sup> Richard H Bell, *Understanding African Philosophy: A Cross-Cultural Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> Bell, *Understanding African Philosophy*.

<sup>20</sup> Polycarp Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspectives on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions* (Lanham: Lexington, 2006), 66.

<sup>21</sup> Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspectives on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions*.

<sup>22</sup> Hall, “New Orleans Jazz Funerals.”

subjects, allowing for high levels of ritualistic continuance.<sup>23</sup> Thus a clear line can be traced from the funerary practices of the Yoruba to the American slaves to the freed black community of New Orleans.

Yoruba funerary traditions, developing out of Yoruba and African communalistic ethics, set the precedent for the ritualistic and ethical characteristics of New Orleans jazz funerals. Yoruba communities had secret burial societies, called “ésusérs” or “contribution clubs,” in which members pledged to organize and attend the funerals of all members.<sup>24</sup> These groups honored the African ethical obligation to care for community members, even in the moment of their death. Their secretive nature reinforced ethical principles that emphasized caring as a duty to others, not as a pursuit of individual gain. And so Yoruba burial societies were a testament to what Ikuenobe deems the “correlative sense of communal rights and communal duty” that defines both African ethics and care ethics.<sup>25</sup>

West African funeral rituals were continued in the burial practices of slaves brought to the United States from the region. Slaves had significantly restricted mobility and autonomy, and as a result developed a tradition of elaborate funeral processions held in the secrecy of nighttime throughout Georgia and South Carolina.<sup>26</sup> Hundreds of slaves from various plantations gathered and marched to burial plots.<sup>27</sup> Their processions would later be echoed in jazz funerals—slow and mournful hymns were sung on the walk from the church to the burial plot, and the journey home was accompanied by joyful song and dance, which was continued in a protracted feast and

---

<sup>23</sup> Hall, “New Orleans Jazz Funerals.”

<sup>24</sup> Hall, “New Orleans Jazz Funerals.”

<sup>25</sup> Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspectives on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions*, 66.

<sup>26</sup> David R Roediger, “And Die in Dixie: Funerals, Death, & Heaven in the Slave Community 1700-1865,” *The Massachusetts Review* 22.1 (1981): 163-83.

<sup>27</sup> Roediger, “And Die in Dixie,” 163-83.

celebration upon return.<sup>28</sup> The use of song and celebration in funerals came directly from West African tradition.<sup>29</sup> For in both West African and New Orleans, funerals were moments in which entire communities came together to honor the deceased, regardless of personal histories, and to revel in their shared societal bonds.

West African funerary practice also saw its continuance in American burial societies. New Orleans developed a vast network of benevolent and mutual aid societies at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that provided members with health insurance and guaranteed them proper burials, including brass band accompaniments, in much the same way that Yoruba burial societies safeguarded their members' funerary customs.<sup>30</sup> The organizations were widespread in the post-Reconstruction era, and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 80% of black residents of New Orleans belonged to a benevolent society.<sup>31</sup> The number of organizations had skyrocketed to approximately 600 by the 1930s.<sup>32</sup> Because these groups provided brass band funerals for all members, and because membership was not exclusionary on the basis of wealth or social status, the extensive participation in benevolent societies indicates the frequency with which jazz funerals occurred. In much the same way that West African secret burial societies emphasized communal duty and selflessness, these groups brought the ethos of African communalism to the American South, fueling the jazz funeral tradition and the ethical mandate behind it.

But it is important to note that benevolent and mutual aid societies were not simply an outgrowth of West African ethics—they were tools for survival. Blacks were denied health insurance coverage by white companies at the turn of the 20th century, and rates of black

---

<sup>28</sup> Roediger, "And Die in Dixie," 163-83.

<sup>29</sup> Roediger, "And Die in Dixie," 163-83.

<sup>30</sup> Atkins, "Class Acts and Daredevils," 166-80.

<sup>31</sup> Atkins, "Class Acts and Daredevils," 166-80.

<sup>32</sup> Hall, "New Orleans Jazz Funerals."



mortality were incredibly high.<sup>33</sup> A one-year-old black child born between 1860 and 1880 could expect to live 36 years on average—10 years less than a white child.<sup>34</sup> Benevolent societies were thus a response to the deleterious health effects of widespread discrimination. Their broad popularity was a testament to how the obligations of care take new forms for oppressed peoples. For when society turned its back on their needs, they were forced to fill the caring void in order to survive.

While this paper focuses on the ethical work performed by jazz funerals, a diligent analysis would be incomplete without a brief mention of the religious and spiritual underpinnings of the tradition. West African funerals were celebratory events because traditional Yoruba religion viewed death as a moment of rebirth.<sup>35</sup> The slaves of Louisiana and freedmen of New Orleans had been largely converted to Christianity, but they, too, viewed death as a celebratory moment because they associated it with resurrection.<sup>36</sup> This was particularly true for the black community of New Orleans during the time of slavery, when death was widely understood as an opportunity to return to their African homelands.<sup>37</sup> And while this line of thinking stems primarily from religious thought, these spiritual beliefs were shaped by societal conditions. During and after slavery, black residents of New Orleans were forced to endure substantial hardships. The great hope placed in death was, in many ways, a response to the disappointments of life and a necessary tool for sustaining hope amidst great suffering.<sup>38</sup> Jazz funerals represented a rare opportunity for the black community to amass in public without fear

---

<sup>33</sup> Hall, “New Orleans Jazz Funerals.”

<sup>34</sup> Richard Brent Turner, *Jazz Religion, the Second Line, and Black New Orleans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Kein, “The Celebration of Life in New Orleans Jazz Funerals,” 19-26.

<sup>36</sup> Secundy, “Coping with Words and Song,” 100-105.

<sup>37</sup> Roediger, “And Die in Dixie,” 163-83.

<sup>38</sup> Secundy, “Coping with Words and Song,” 100-105.

of persecution.<sup>39</sup> They were a chance for “musical voices [to resound] in spaces where political voices had been silenced.”<sup>40</sup> And thus the funerary traditions that set the stage for jazz funerals were steeped in religious and circumstantial modes that necessitated a joyous response to death.

### **The “Second Line” and Communal Involvement**

The ethical work performed by jazz funerals was not, however, simply an outgrowth of historical and cultural processes—it was also embodied by the performative aspects of the tradition, and in particular the “second line.” The second line of jazz funerals, or the dancing parade of community members that join in the processional after the burial is complete, exemplifies relational ethics by emphasizing the importance of connectivity between community members. By incorporating unaffiliated community members into the typically private realm of a burial, jazz funerals transform the experience of death into a public celebration of the relationships between the living. In the words of the writer Val Ferdinand, jazz funerals “were leisurely public acts, theatrical displays designed not to hide burial as a fearful obscenity, but to exhibit it as a community act, the social obligation of friends and family.”<sup>41</sup> Through their sexualized dance forms, their improvisatory modes of collaboration, and their public nature, the second line performs the ethical work of teaching caring obligations through physicality.

Just as benevolent societies trace their roots to Yoruba burial groups, the second line was born of a different diasporic tradition—Rara. Slaves were also brought en masse from West Africa to Haiti, where many then continued on to Louisiana during the slave trade and after the

---

<sup>39</sup> Matt Sakakeeny, “New Orleans Music as a Circulatory System,” *Black Music Research Journal* 31.2 (2011): 291-325.

<sup>40</sup> Sakakeeny, “New Orleans Music as a Circulatory System,” 291-325.

<sup>41</sup> Val Ferdinand, “Second Line/Cutting the Body Loose,” in *What We Must See: Young Black Storytellers*, ed. Orde Coombs. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1971), 21.

Haitian revolution.<sup>42</sup> With them they brought the Haitian Voodoo religion and its practice of Rara, a six-week religious celebration performed by the rural and urban poor of Haiti.<sup>43</sup> During Rara, various groups march in winding, perambulatory processions over great distances, singing and growing as community members join in.<sup>44</sup> According to one scholar of the ceremony, Rara is “a popular performance that invites its audience to become part of the group and move away with it.”<sup>45</sup> Like the jazz funeral, it is an explicitly communal act, both moving through public places and encouraging shared participation.

Second line dancers valorized human connectivity and caring relations by engaging in hyper-sexual motions that personified procreation.<sup>46</sup> The style of dance performed by the second line comes from Banda, the funerary dance performed at the annual Haitian Voodoo ritual Rara.<sup>47</sup> Haitian Voodoo practice teaches that with death comes rebirth, a notion literally embodied by the highly sexual nature of Banda dance.<sup>48</sup> In jazz funerals, second line dancers will create circles around two dancers who engage in sexualized Banda-style dancing, moving their hips, bending their backs, fanning their crotches, and rolling their bodies.<sup>49</sup> By embracing sex at the moment of death, the second line tradition transforms sex into a communal act—one of beauty, but also of obligation to a continued existence. The use of Banda dance is an ode to societal renewal and a physical reminder to celebrate the shared vivacity of the living.<sup>50</sup> Just as Haitian Voodoo tradition commemorates death with Banda, the ritual dance of rebirth, jazz

---

<sup>42</sup> Atkins, “Class Acts and Daredevils,” 166-80.

<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth McAlister, *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002).

<sup>44</sup> McAlister, *Rara!*.

<sup>45</sup> McAlister, *Rara!*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Kein, “The Celebration of Life in New Orleans Jazz Funerals,” 19-26.

<sup>47</sup> Kein, “The Celebration of Life in New Orleans Jazz Funerals,” 19-26.

<sup>48</sup> Kein, “The Celebration of Life in New Orleans Jazz Funerals,” 19-26.

<sup>49</sup> Atkins, “Class Acts and Daredevils,” 166-80.

<sup>50</sup> Atkins, “Class Acts and Daredevils,” 166-80.

funerals are, at their core, a celebration of life and a clear directive to engage in loving relations for the benefit of the greater community.<sup>51</sup> Thus explicitly sexual dancing is not only appropriate for a funerary ritual, it is necessary.

Through improvisatory forms of dance, the second line processional also emphasizes relational ethics through its use of physical improvisation. Community members engage in improvisational dancing, responding to musical cues and fellow second liners in a joyous and deeply relational performative tradition. Dancers move from simple step-touch motions during the slow, pre-burial dirge processional to a lively mix of double steps, twirls, jumps, and stomps in what is a spontaneous and joyful display of physicality.<sup>52</sup> The movements of the second liners are not premeditated, but rather are highly responsive to the music of the brass band and the motions of their fellow dancers.<sup>53</sup> This is in line with Nel Nodding's notion of motivational displacement—involvement in this second line dance shifts participants' focus from their individual selves to those around them. Any individuals' movement necessitates careful attention to the motions of their neighbors, and so this performative act reinforces the fundamental relationality of society.

The second line of the jazz funeral also promotes communalism through its intentional placement in the public sphere. It is no accident that the second line winds through the neighborhoods of the deceased to mark their death—rather, the highly public nature of the processional draws community members out to fulfill their societal duty of support. Jazz funerals use performative acts to reinforce the importance of anonymous communal bonds, and strangers are brought together in the second line by dancing and making music together in an

---

<sup>51</sup> Hall, "New Orleans Jazz Funerals."

<sup>52</sup> Hall, "New Orleans Jazz Funerals."

<sup>53</sup> Hall, "New Orleans Jazz Funerals."

improvisatory fashion. This diasporic dance teaches community members that the response to loss must be to come together, regardless of previous acquaintance. In the jazz funeral, “the spectator must become part of the action to understand the event’s meaning,” and thus relation comes to supersede isolation at this moment of intense vulnerability.<sup>54</sup>

### **Jazz Improvisation and Relational Ethics**

Dance was not the only improvisatory form to dominate jazz funerals—music also played an important role in both the performative aspects of the tradition and its ethical effects. The choice of jazz as a medium for funerals in New Orleans acted as a continuation of musical heritage for the black community. But it also served the ethical purpose of promoting attentive listening and responsiveness.<sup>55</sup> For while the dance of the second line emphasized relational ethics through its use of physical improvisation, there was also a distinct call-and-response relationship between musicians and dancers, as well as between individual musicians, that promoted relationality. And it was the music of jazz itself, and its particular reliance on improvisation, which ultimately acted to sonically reinforce the notion of civic responsibility by musically enacting inter-dependency.

Previous scholarship exists on the ways in which jazz improvisation can encourage ethical relationships. Professor of music Jeff Warren has been influential in this field, positing that jazz improvisation is a “social act” which uses the process of music-making to place people in direct relationship with one another and necessitate conscientious listening, a mode of

---

<sup>54</sup> Hall, “New Orleans Jazz Funerals,” 103.

<sup>55</sup> Jeff Warren, “Improvising Music/Improvising Relationships: Musical Improvisation and Inter-Relational Ethics,” *New Sound* 32 (2008): 94-105.

behavior that can be translated to relationships outside of the musical realm.<sup>56</sup> He proposes that “the relational leads to the ethical through responsibility; through the valuing of others, the limiting of ourselves for the sake of others, and giving, listening, responding to, and respecting others.”<sup>57</sup> While Warren does not expressly link his argument to care ethics, his writing makes it clear that improvisation has the potential to teach the importance of engaging in caring relationships by modeling them in the act of musical creation. Thus the use of jazz as the medium for funerary brass bands is crucial to understanding the ethical nature of the practice—the improvisatory musical form creates a sonic foundation for relationality that reverberates throughout the entire procession.

An analysis of Bunk Johnson’s 1945 jazz funeral recording demonstrates the ways in which jazz improvisation facilitates caring relations throughout the various musical segments of the funeral procession. While this paper focuses on jazz funerals during the peak of their popularity—around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—the technology of the time and the public nature of the event meant that documentation was nearly nonexistent. Jazz musician Bunk Johnson decided to record a CD in 1945 that would recreate the jazz funeral parade music as accurately as possible—playing outdoors, using instrumentation and tuning typical of the earlier practice, and ordering the songs in accordance with the funerary progression—making *Bunk’s Brass Band and 1945 Sessions* one of the earliest and most comprehensive documentations of the jazz funeral musical tradition.<sup>58</sup> The instrumentation consisted of two trumpets, an E flat clarinet, alto horn,

---

<sup>56</sup> Warren, “Improvising Music/Improvising Relationships,” 94-105.

<sup>57</sup> Warren, “Improvising Music/Improvising Relationships,” 105.

<sup>58</sup> Sakakeeny, “New Orleans Music as a Circulatory System,” 291-325. The album was recorded in 1945, but not released under a mainstream record label until the year 1992.

baritone horn, trombone, tuba, snare drum, and bass drum—an arrangement similar to typical late 20<sup>th</sup> century funerary brass bands.<sup>59</sup>

On the walk to the burial, the music consisted of slow and somber tunes with little improvisation. In “Nearer my God to Thee,” the song begins with a solo rolling drum line reminiscent of military drumming and likely borrowing from the French martial music tradition influential at the time. A lethargic drumbeat continues to beat out in 4/4 time as a chorus of wailing brass lines join in. While there are multiple melodic lines happening simultaneously, a clear central melody dominates and there is a lack of free improvisation. “Just a Closer Walk With Thee” similarly begins with a rolling drum line. There is more polyphony in this tune, but it is contained within a clear melodic framework and dirge-like rhythmic structure. The drum line is performed straight-on—not swung or syncopated—with heavy drum hits on the first beat of each line, creating a musical framework conducive to a slow, plodding march.

These pieces stand in stark contrast to the music of the second half of the CD, which was meant to depict the lively jazz and ragtime pieces the brass band played after the burial and the cutting loose of the body. These pieces were often done in 2/4 time, swung or syncopated, and with far more improvisation. This can be heard in Johnson’s version of “Oh When the Saints Go Marching In,” a very common jazz funeral number. The spiritual hymn, premised on the ascendance to heaven and now a musical symbol of New Orleans, is performed in a fast swing that encapsulates the joy of the jazz funeral.<sup>60</sup> “Didn’t He Ramble” was also a popular song in the late 1800s and often played during this portion of a jazz funeral.<sup>61</sup> In Bunk Johnson’s

---

<sup>59</sup> Liner notes to *Bunk’s Brass Band and 1945 Sessions*, Bunk Johnson, Isidore Barbarin, Lawrence Marrero, George Lewis, Adolphe Alexander, Baby Dodds, Jim Robinson, Louis Madison, and Joe Clark, American Music Recordings, CD, 1992.

<sup>60</sup> Secundy, “Coping with Words and Song,” 100-105.

<sup>61</sup> Sakakeeny, “New Orleans Music as a Circulatory System,” 291-325.

rendition, the pace of the music is not only noticeably quickened, but the instrumentalists diverge far more in their lines. Improvisation in this form of brass band music is not what most imagine when they think of jazz improvisation—it is not a progression of isolated, consecutive, improvised instrumental solos. Rather, it is the simultaneous sounding of individual variations over one cohesive melodic line, with particular instruments occasionally veering off the underlying melody to greater extents than others at complementary moments. The polyrhythmic nature of the resulting metric pattern leads to a complex arrangement of syncopation that requires attentive musicianship.

Thus brass band jazz music has highly specific modes of instrumentation and improvisation that encourage the sort of active listening and conscientious creating that Warren believed promoted caring relationships. Brass band musicians, particularly during the improvisatory phase of the second half of the jazz funeral, had to constantly balance their individual musical decisions with those of their fellow eight or so band members. Individual melodic choices were important, but were given secondary consideration after the overall harmonic resonance of the full band. In this way, the genre of the jazz funeral provided a musical template for how to live a life in caring relation to others, and so contributed to the ethical work of the tradition.

## **Conclusion**

In the liner notes of Bunk Johnson's CD, an anonymous writer provides a first-hand account of the power of the music played at jazz funerals. It is clear from their words how viscerally music affected the emotions of processional participants, from the family of the deceased to the unaffiliated second line.



We'd have some immense crowds following. They would follow the funeral up to the cemetery just to get this ragtime music comin' back. Some of the women would have beer cans on their arm. They'd stop and get a half can of beer and drink that to freshen up and follow the band for miles—in the dust, in the dirt, in the street, on the sidewalk, and the Law was trying not to gang the thoroughfare, but just let them have their way. There wouldn't be any fight or anything of that kind; it would just be dancin' in the street. Even police horse—mounted police—their horse would prance. Music done them all the good in the world. That's the class of music we used on funerals.<sup>62</sup>

But it was the way that music combined with dance, with grief, with culture, and with a rich historical lineage that created the singular experience of the jazz funeral.

Jazz funerals used music, dance, and ritual to perform ethical work by promoting caring relationships within the black community of New Orleans in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They took the isolating moment of death and transformed it into a communal mandate to come together and celebrate a shared survival. Historical burial practices were synthesized with contemporary performative trends that together demonstrated a societal valuation of communal care. Physical and musical improvisation laid the groundwork for responsivity, and anonymous public participation enacted it. And so this tradition embodied the notions of communal obligation central to the Yoruba ethics that predated it and the idea of interdependency at the basis of the feminist care ethics that it far preceded.

While the goals of the jazz funeral were numerous, and included a number of religious and sociopolitical objectives outside the realm of those studied in this paper, it is clear that jazz funerals performed a very specific form of ethical work. In a highly public forum, they taught a persecuted group to respond to their sorrow not with isolation, but with togetherness. Very much in response to the historical oppression of the black community, jazz funerals made clear the ethical mandate to care for every member of one's community, regardless of previous connection. Societal responses to loss became some of the most instructive tools on how to value

---

<sup>62</sup> Liner notes to *Bunk's Brass Band and 1945 Sessions*.

what remained. Death transformed into a cause for celebration. And, in the case of the jazz funeral, it taught a group of people how to live.

## Bibliography

- Atkins, Jennifer. "Class Acts and Daredevils: Black Masculinity in Jazz Funeral Dancing." *The Journal of American Culture* 35.2 (2012): 166-80.
- Bell, Richard H. *Understanding African Philosophy: A Cross-Cultural Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Bewaji, John Ayotunde Isola. "Ethics and Morality in Yoruba Culture." In *A Companion to African Philosophy*, edited by Kwasi Wiredu, 396-403. Malden: Blackwell, 2004.
- Cassin, Maxine. "Three Love Poems by a Native." *Callaloo* 29.4 (2006): 1033–1034.
- Ferdinand, Val. "Second Line/Cutting the Body Loose." In *What We Must See: Young Black Storytellers*, edited by Orde Coombs, 21. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1971.
- Gilligan, Carol. "Hearing the Difference: Theorizing Connection." *Hypatia* 10.2 (1995): 120-27.
- Hall, Ardencie. "New Orleans Jazz Funerals: Transition to the Ancestors." PhD diss., New York University, 1998.
- Held, Virginia. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006.
- Johnson, Bunk. *Bunk's Brass Band and 1945 Sessions*. Bunk Johnson, Isidore Barbarin, Lawrence Marrero, George Lewis, Adolphe Alexander, Baby Dodds, Jim Robinson, Louis Madison, and Joe Clark. American Music Recordings, 1992. CD.
- Ikuenobe, Polycarp. *Philosophical Perspectives on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2006.
- Kein, Sybil. "The Celebration of Life in New Orleans Jazz Funerals." *Revue Française d'Études Américaines* 51 (1992): 19–26.
- Liner notes to *Bunk's Brass Band and 1945 Sessions*. Bunk Johnson, Isidore Barbarin, Lawrence Marrero, George Lewis, Adolphe Alexander, Baby Dodds, Jim Robinson, Louis Madison, and Joe Clark. American Music Recordings. CD. 1992.
- Mico Productions. "What is the Second Line?" Accessed April 5, 2017.  
<http://www.micoproductions.com/what-is-a-second-line/>.
- McAlister, Elizabeth. *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora*. Berkeley: University of California, 2002.
- Noddings, Nel. "The Language of Care Ethics." *Knowledge Quest; Chicago* 40.5 (2012): 52-56.

- Osbey, Brenda Marie. "One More Last Chance: Ritual and the Jazz Funeral." *The Georgia Review* 50.1 (1996): 97-107.
- Roediger, David R. "And Die in Dixie: Funerals, Death, & Heaven in the Slave Community 1700-1865." *The Massachusetts Review* 22.1 (1981): 163-83.
- Sakakeeny, Matt. "New Orleans Music as a Circulatory System." *Black Music Research Journal* 31.2 (2011): 291-325.
- Secundy, Marian Gray. "Coping with Words and Song: The New Orleans Jazz Funeral." *Literature and Medicine* 8 (1989): 100-105. Doi: 10.1353/lm.2011.0087.
- Turner, Richard Brent. *Jazz Religion, the Second Line, and Black New Orleans*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.
- Warren, Jeff. "Improvising Music/Improvising Relationships: Musical Improvisation and Inter-Relational Ethics." *New Sound* 32 (2008): 94-105.
- Warren, Jeff R. *Music and Ethical Responsibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014.