

Dancing the Wild Bamboula

There is a park in New Orleans not far from Bourbon Street. Officially, it is Beauregard Square, also known at various times during New Orleans' past as Place Du Cirque or Place des Negres. Most locals still call it Congo Square.

Before the Civil War, wealthy New Orleans slave owners would let their slaves congregate on Sundays at a place that became known as Congo Square. There, they would sing their songs, dance their dances and practice their religion. When the West African Vodoun religion reached Jamaica, it rapidly integrated with Catholicism and many of the prevailing pagan practices of the Caribs, the native population of the Caribbean. This amalgam of beliefs known as voodoo, had offshoots from often called hoodoo.

Not knowing the true meaning of the various ceremonies that took place at Congo Square, many benevolent white slave owners often participated in the drumming, and the dancing of the wild bamboula, a frenzied and sensual dance. The songs created at Congo Square were the musical seeds that sprouted, matured and grew into what we now know as jazz.

There is a cultural center located in a part of Beauregard Square, known as Louis Armstrong Memorial Park after the man that brought jazz to the world. Everyone has heard of Louis Armstrong, but few realize that his musical roots began with the rhythmic beat of West African drums and the dancing of the wild bamboula.

The Louis Armstrong Park is a must-visit. The entrance to the park, a large white arch that proclaims the name Armstrong, lies at the intersection of St. Ann and N. Rampart. The park is also close to Basin Street, made famous by both song and myth. It is also near the St. Louis Cemetery # 1 and the Iberville Project.