

Foreword

New Orleans is a tempting and inspiring subject for all manner of artists, particularly poets. Unfortunately, however, much of the iconography and mythology are so deeply embedded that one must search long and hard to find freshness and truth in lyrics inspired by the Crescent City. Perhaps Philip Larkin says it best in the opening lines of his poem "For Sydney Bechet." Addressing the great saxophonist, he says,

That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes
Like New Orleans reflected on the water,
And in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes....

Not only does Larkin capture the signature vibrato of Bechet in these lines. He also suggests that homage to the birthplace of jazz all too often comes in the form of well-worn clichés and sentimentality. Rarely do we find poetic expression equal to the rich, vibrant, participatory culture that it would celebrate. Rarer still are the lyrical renderings that capture the eccentricities and quirks of character for which the city is known. To be sure, New Orleans can claim a number of poets who exude a powerfully authentic sense of place, each I might add, with his or her own unique flavor. Among these outstanding artists are the following: Brenda Marie Osbey, Chuck Perkins, Dennis Formento, Maxine Cassin, John Sinclair, Labertha McCormick, Kalamu Ya Salaam, Mona Lisa Saloy, Lee Grue, Quo Vadis Gex Breaux and the late bards Tom Dent and Everette Maddox, to name a few. To this group I hereby add the author of this long overdue present volume, Arturo Pfister, a "walkin'" personification of New Orleans. Or as one of his characters would say, he is New Orleans "to the bone." With the publication of this collection, Arturo, long a favorite in his hometown, will, hopefully, receive the wider recognition he so richly deserves.

Although Pfister's verse evidences primarily influences of the Beat and Black Arts movements, the poems collected herein are characterized by considerable diversity of form and subject matter. There are the long, free verse efforts such as "My Name is New Orleans," "Poem for Our Mothers," and "Poem for Our Fathers," all popular, signature performance pieces, loved by the poet's faithful local followers.

Steeped in the lore, vernacular, and folkways of the city, these poems bombard auditors with riotous cataloguing of all things "New Orleans." Similar in tone and manner to these poems are several done in homage to Louis Armstrong, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mayor Dutch Morial. Although marked in part by some of the humorous touches noted in the aforementioned pieces, these four latter poems reflect the more somber consciousness-raising tone of the Black Arts Movement, an aspect given additional poignancy by warm references to the underclass -- the "bellhops," "maids" and "bartenders" -- those who serve as the base of the city's all-important tourist economy. Included also among the longer poems are Pfister's versions of such classics of the oral tradition as "Stagolee" and "Shine," both customized to a New Orleans setting, of course.

In many of the personal poems, particularly in love poems such as "Sunday Suite," Pfister employs a markedly experimental spatial arrangement, thereby matching the abstractness of the lyric. The same stylistic manner is apparent in the brooding "Japan," perhaps the most Beat-influenced poem of the collection, as suggested by the persona's nostalgic recollection of Miles Davis, his hatred and fear of "the bomb," and his overriding nihilism.

A good number of the poems in the collection are extremely conventional in style and content. This is particularly the case in many of the love poems (excluding the poems of the "Whipped" section) and the elegiac lyrics. I would guess that this could be attributed to the poet's having been "commissioned" to write these pieces, in many instances by friends and loved ones of the subjects, and in other cases by organizations intent on honoring various individuals. To make these pieces believable, Pfister invokes the appropriate voice, perhaps a bit naive and "straight" for his hipper fans, but just right for the occasion and client. Those who prefer his wonted manner applied to the love poem can check out the collection's 100-poem sequence, "Whipped." Like the sonnet sequences of old, these poems reflect the angst of unrequited love, with love lyrics swinging wildly from joy to despair, from love to hate, from hyperbolic praise of the beloved to scathing condemnation. The tension is enhanced by the persona's ironic acknowledgement that his only escape for the pain comes through his versification.

Pfister's poetry reflects an undeniable over- and understanding of the strong musical roots of the city. Startling jazz-inspired images are likely to crop up at any point in a given lyric. For example, note the first two lines of the second stanza of "Poem for Our Mothers."

This poem is for the satin dolls, the yardbird suite tastes of honey,
walkin' (all by themselves) on Green Dolphin Street...

Here, through mention of songs identified with each, the poet conjures up images of three revered jazz masters -- Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, and, again, Miles Davis. Other poems inspired by the music are "Aaron," "Rising Star," "Dr. Q," "The Kidd," "Father and Sons," "Music Maker," and "A Taste of Heaven." In dedicating these poems to Aaron Neville, Davell Crawford, Quincy Jones, Kidd Jordan, the Marsalis family, William Houston and Raymond Miles, respectively, Pfister honors all forms of the music of the jazz-blues continuum -- rhythm and blues, straight-ahead and avant-garde jazz, big band music and gospel. With the exception of Jones, all of the subjects are, of course, New Orleanians.

From my limited perspective, one of the most tragic signs of the times is Arturo Pfister's continued absence from New Orleans. Like so many of the city's most creative spirits, he remains in exile, four years past the cataclysm. In this group we may add the Neville Brothers, Henry Butler, Chuck Siler (who contributed the wonderful illustrations for this book) and many more. We still have hopes of their return. Yet others have taken irrevocable leave. Alvin Batiste, the Turbinton brothers (Willie and Earl), John Scott, Snooks Eaglin, again, to name a few. For those of us who feel these losses most profoundly, it is most assuring to read the concluding poem of the "Impressions" section, "Song of My People (a 'Katrina poem' for all y'all)", wherein the poet laments "a new diaspora of displaced souls" but looks forward to "a frantic future of renaissance and remembrance." I am confident that I am not alone in wishing that this self-professed "singer of life before the storm" return to record, as only he can, the strength with which "his people" meet the profound challenges and changes thrust upon them by Katrina.

Henry C. Lacey

Professor Emeritus of English

Dillard University

New Orleans, LA