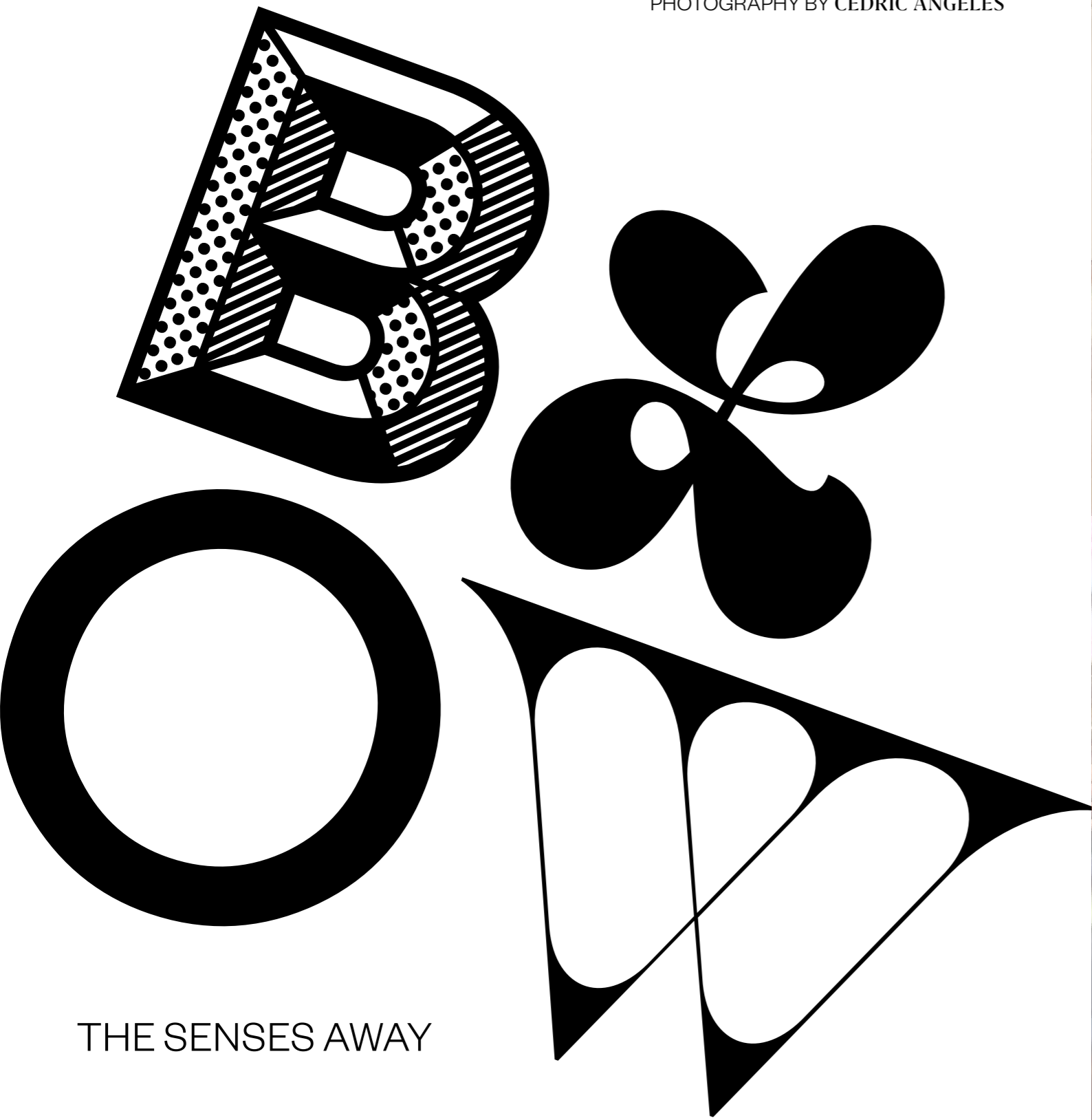


WHEN ALEXANDRA CARLTON FINDS HERSELF IN NEW ORLEANS DURING JAZZ FEST,  
SHE DOES HER BEST TO SWIM AGAINST THE TOURIST TIDE.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CEDRIC ANGELES



THE SENSES AWAY

The Preservation Hall Jazz Band belt it out in the French Quarter, New Orleans





In the fantasy New Orleans that lives in my head, Bourbon Street is all grandiose and glorious iniquity: chaos and carnival, a whirling Mardi Gras, centuries of rich and earthy Creole culture, life and death doing a ghoulish, hypercoloured dance to the wild parps of trombones and trumpets.

In reality, when you're here on a Friday night during the opening stanzas of Jazz Fest – which has run every year in April or May since its beginnings in 1970 – it seems like it's mostly a ton of tourists with lurid green Hand Grenade cocktails in one hand and buckets of beignets, the traditional deep-fried donut of New Orleans, in the other, barrelling sloppily in and out of strip clubs.

There are flashes of the city's true mad charms; a six-foot wildman in a top hat peers at me from a darkened doorway and flashes a silver-toothed grin and a few street performers are blaring out some spectacular jazz (of course they are – it's baked into the blood here). But overall, this bit of the city is New Orleans Disneyland.

And that's the trap of the Big Easy, if you don't push yourself beyond the "easy" bits – such as the tourist-centric French Quarter, particularly if you're there during the large festivals (and there's always a festival – the city hosts more than 130 every year). You could, if you like, spend a weekend on Bourbon, hopping from the flashiest neon-lit bars and jazz clubs to shops peddling cheap po' boys, fried oysters and voodoo tarot card tat and go home saying you've seen New Orleans but really all you've seen is a drinking town with a jazz problem. There's much more.

So I set out to dig a little deeper, beginning at my base of the NPSI Hotel in the CBD ([hotel.qantas.com.au/nopsineworleans](http://hotel.qantas.com.au/nopsineworleans)), which is close enough to walk to the French Quarter if I wanted to but far enough away that I don't feel like I'm living inside a Southern Baz Luhrmann movie. I head for the Bywater district on the curve of the nut-brown Mississippi.

I join the queue to get into Bacchanal Wine ([bacchanalwine.com](http://bacchanalwine.com)), which locals call a "weird little wine bar" turned restaurant and outdoor jazz club opposite the graffiti-strewn former Navy depot. They don't take bookings and everyone waiting to get in seems to be a diehard fan. "I come here for my birthday every year," says Katie. It's her 40th this weekend and she's dressed for it – and Jazz Fest and living in this city generally – wearing pink fishnets with playing cards and dollar bills pinned to her pork pie hat.

"You on your own, mama? You come on through," hollers the maitre d', ushering me ahead of a larger group he can't yet find room for in the fairy-light-flecked courtyard. "You happy to go upstairs?" I'm happy to go anywhere, I tell him as my eyes take in the sultry prettiness of people gathered in groups picking from cheese platters to the sound of a smooth live double bass and saxophone in the descending dusk. I take a spot on the balcony and order smoked Gulf shrimp dip and a glass of wine and let the warm-breathed Louisiana evening wash over me.

U-turning back to Bourbon Street, this time I leave the heaving debauchery above ground and shuffle onto a wooden bench of the low-ceiling, cavernous 19th-century building that houses the iconic Preservation Hall ([preservationhall.com](http://preservationhall.com)), decked out with peeling posters and portraits of the city's jazz legends.

The club was founded in the early 1960s as a place to preserve the spirit of authentic New Orleans jazz and its house band, led by Mark Braud, grandson of one of the city's finest, trumpeter John "Picket" Brunious Sr, is playing tonight. Braud and his five-piece whirl out an hour of pure musical precision as the crowd stomps and claps. There are ghosts floating round the creaking timber boards of this building, you can feel them.



(From opposite) Preservation Hall; a marching jazz band in the French Quarter; Bacchanal Wine in the Bywater neighbourhood





Brennan's restaurant (above); the kitchen crew at La Petite Grocery on Magazine Street (below)



I could swear my jazz pianist grandma is right there beside me. This place would light up her soul.

The next day, the French Quarter's streets are lined with zombies, a few too many Hand Grenade and Hurricane cocktails having turned everyone grey-eyed and grim. But not when I step inside one of its more genteel brunch addresses: the charming and historic Brennan's ([brennansneworleans.com](http://brennansneworleans.com)), an avowed institution that doesn't compromise its traditions for cheap tourist thrills. The two-storey mansion was built in 1795 by the great-grandfather of the French artist Edgar Degas and was once the Banque de la Louisiane – the first bank in Louisiana. The Brennan family took it over in the 1950s and turned it into a restaurant in 1956, painting it in the trademark candy-pink façade it has today.

If you want to try a genuine New Orleans brunch this is where you head to. I order a procession of the classics: thick, dark chicory coffee, eggs Sardou – a local invention of poached eggs, fried artichokes, spinach and choron sauce – a bowl of unctuous gumbo studded with shrimp and andouille, and an escalope of rabbit with remoulade. This is how you eat in this town. With gusto and recklessness, like death is going to come knocking for you tomorrow (and if you eat sauces like this every day it probably will).

From there I head south to what is, conversely, called Uptown – or the Garden District – to let the city show me more of its decorous side. Here, along Prytania and Third streets, Washington and St Charles avenues, are the extraordinary 19th-century Italianate and Greek Revival mansions that were once slave-owning plantations then the over-the-top residences of post-Civil War carpetbaggers. The imposing colonnades, grand double staircases, moss-draped myrtles, fanning cabbage palms and rocking chairs on porches. Astonishing. And then little touches of New Orleans mischief that you wouldn't find anywhere else: jester masks on front doors, street signs draped with rainbow-coloured beads.

Lunch is a po' boy, that great Southern classic of a wedge of French bread filled with anything from shrimp and oyster to beef debris. You have to have it, even though, as New Orleans food writer Brett Martin once said, "You make a decision to torpedo your day" on the food front if you eat a shrimp po' boy for lunch. They're that enormous, rich and appetite-ending. I get mine from Domilise's ([domilisespoboys.com](http://domilisespoboys.com)) on Annunciation Street and I choose shrimp. But as I watch a couple of lifesavers from the local rec centre who look like they know what they're doing order a half-and-half oyster and a roast beef and Swiss, I wonder if I should go back for seconds. You can't decide to torpedo your day twice though and the shrimp are fried hot and crisp, lined up like soldiers on mayo and hot sauce on that beautiful crunch-and-cloud combination that is the city's famous Leidenheimer bread.

I ease out of the day browsing the racks at Peaches Records ([peachesrecordsandtapes.com](http://peachesrecordsandtapes.com)) on Magazine Street to the beat of the thud-thud-thud of a freestyle basketball game across the road. Then a languid dinner at a neighbourhood Louisianan bistro, La Petite Grocery ([lapetitegrocery.com](http://lapetitegrocery.com)) – just a cocktail and a few light beignets with blue crab, thanks to my po' boy-scuppered appetite. The bathrooms here smell like cinnamon, I notice. There's always some scent in the air in New Orleans, whether it's the old Hollywood perfume of the magnolia trees or the cayenne and garlic of gumbos and jambalayas and that red shrimp stew known as étouffée or the fresh gasp of wet earth after a short, sharp burst of rain.

On my last morning in the city, Bourbon Street finally seems to be sleeping off its big few days. A grey-haired gentleman strolls down its centre, past the discarded straws and streamers. He wears white pants and winklepickers and has an enormous sousaphone hooked casually across his body. After the tourists go home, the jazz starts to reclaim the city. ●