

# New Orleans

MAGAZINE  
APRIL 2009

## JAZZ

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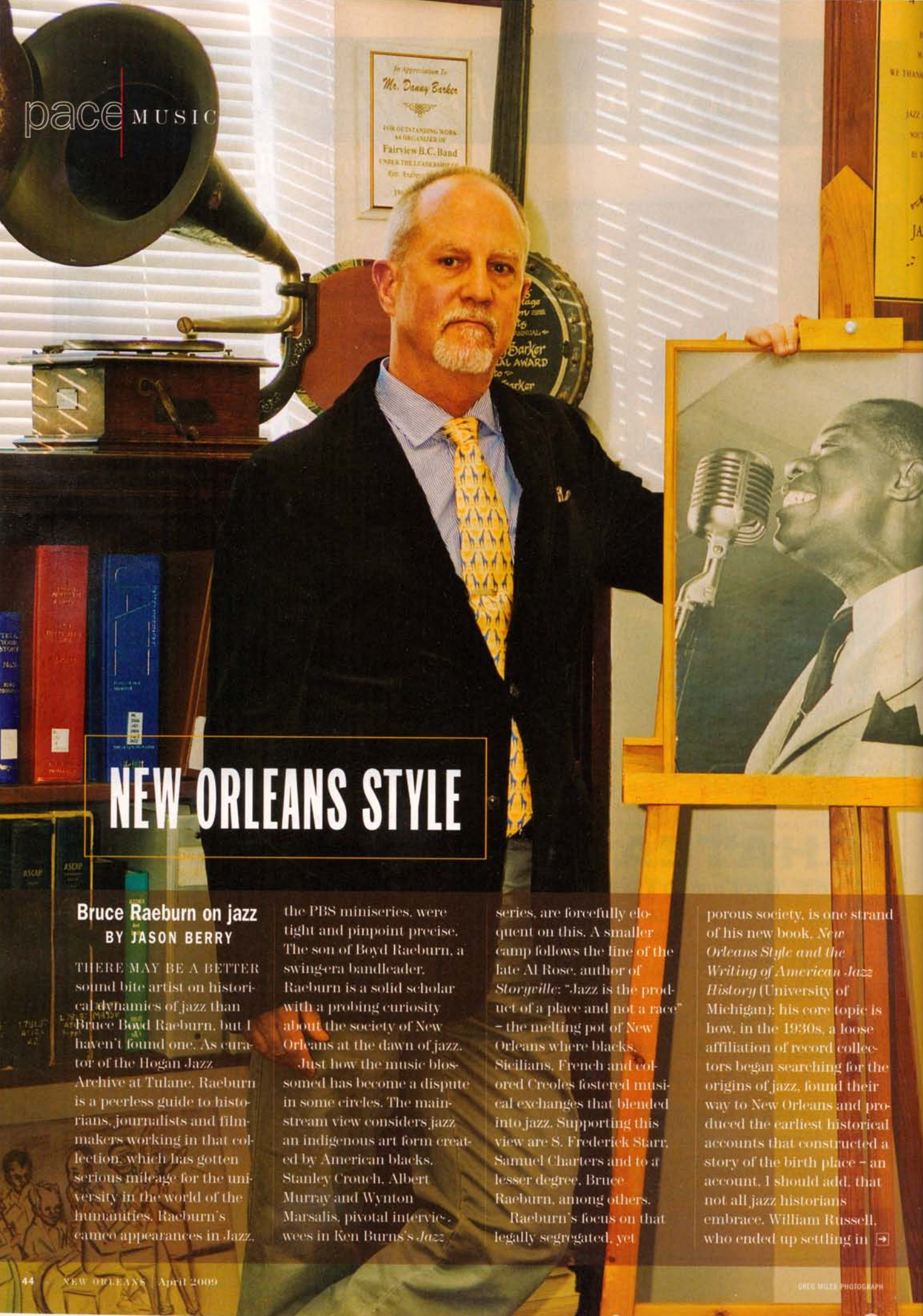
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## NEW ORLEANS STYLE

### Bruce Raeburn on jazz BY JASON BERRY

THERE MAY BE A BETTER sound bite artist on historical dynamics of jazz than Bruce Boyd Raeburn, but I haven't found one. As curator of the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane, Raeburn is a peerless guide to historians, journalists and filmmakers working in that collection, which has gotten serious mileage for the university in the world of the humanities. Raeburn's cameo appearances in *Jazz*,

the PBS miniseries, were tight and pinpoint precise. The son of Boyd Raeburn, a swingera bandleader, Raeburn is a solid scholar with a probing curiosity about the society of New Orleans at the dawn of jazz.

Just how the music blossomed has become a dispute in some circles. The mainstream view considers jazz an indigenous art form created by American blacks. Stanley Crouch, Albert Murray and Wynton Marsalis, pivotal interviewees in Ken Burns's *Jazz*

series, are forcefully eloquent on this. A smaller camp follows the line of the late Al Rose, author of *Storyville*: "Jazz is the product of a place and not a race" — the melting pot of New Orleans where blacks, Sicilians, French and colored Creoles fostered musical exchanges that blended into jazz. Supporting this view are S. Frederick Starr, Samuel Charters and to a lesser degree, Bruce Raeburn, among others.

Raeburn's focus on that legally segregated, yet

porous society, is one strand of his new book, *New Orleans Style and the Writing of American Jazz History* (University of Michigan); his core topic is how, in the 1930s, a loose affiliation of record collectors began searching for the origins of jazz, found their way to New Orleans and produced the earliest historical accounts that constructed a story of the birth place — an account, I should add, that not all jazz historians embrace. William Russell, who ended up settling in →

## MUSIC

New Orleans, exerted a huge influence by all but single-handedly resurrecting the career of Bunk Johnson, who was living in New Iberia in the late '30s, without a trumpet to his name. Through Johnson, the stories flowed about Armstrong, King Oliver and the early years. Russell was amazingly myopic on Johnson, accepting nearly everything he said as gospel truth. (Johnson drank hard and embellished well.) Russell's larger contribution was putting the influence of Congo Square and street parades front and center in the creation account. His most important archive ended up, thankfully, at The Historic New Orleans Collection.

Raeburn writes of Oscar "Papa" Celestin's "Tuxedo Bands [that] played to black audiences at the Pythian Roof Garden and to white audiences at the New Orleans Yacht Club in the 1920s." Citing other examples of crossover appeal, he explains: "Repertoire might shift a little from site to site, but the bands were prepared in advance to satisfy audience demands in any case."

Most of the early jazz writers were political leftists uneasy about the music's functional role in a U.S. city moored to Afro-European traditions. The repertoire that emerged from New Orleans encompassed a lot more than work songs and folk styles. The instrumental sophistication of polished harmonies and polyphony in the brilliant scores of Jelly Roll Morton was a product of genius rooted to a place and a race. Yet as Raeburn observes, a tragic tinge stalked Morton

during his later years in Chicago and New York.

"To many New York musicians, the New Orleans style that Morton wanted was simply 'old fashioned' and they were not about to submit to lectures by a man whose career had died with the Depression."

Raeburn explores the rivalries and disagreements of the early collectors and writers - Charles Edward Smith and Frederic Ramsey chief among them - with an even-handed approach to the Depression-era politics in New York, by then the capital of jazz, with a view of folk music roots. In fact New Orleans Style was a mirror on a Baroque society where parades, good food, sex and homicides inspired song lines. As the collectors ventured south to research and write, a picture on origins emerged, and though it's anything but complete, Raeburn has taken the story an important step forward. He writes: "During the 1940s, anachronistic categories such as 'folk,' 'art' and 'popular' no longer adequately described contemporary conditions: jazz was a folk-derived urban music, recognized as an art form, which competed in the popular music market."

Today, New Orleans Style has secured its niche in the pantheon of jazz idioms, and though the debate over just how the music came together persists, in all of its nuances it remains to be said, sadly so, that the prospects for musicians to sell CDs is harder than it was in the Depression. Lil Wayne, the rap star, sold 2.3 million units last year, more than all jazz records combined. ❁

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