Article

Sounding Affective Consensus
New Orleans’s Black Longshoremen Union and the Strike as Musical Affect, 1872-1907

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Abstract
This paper explores how New Orleans Black dockworkers created affective communities by utilizing brass bands, as evidenced by newspapers, union records, and testimonies from jazz musicians. In an attempt to weave together congruences between ‘history from below’, the affective turn, and theorists of the Black radical tradition, I argue that the nation’s largest Black Union in the late nineteenth century, the Longshoremen’s Protective Union Benevolent Association of New Orleans, successfully intervened in this port city’s economy by building a mass movement. They did so not only because of their strategic location in relation to capital and a modernizing logistics industry, but also because these dockworkers successfully struggled to control the affective modalities and temporalities of daily life. It was in this latter strategy that polyphonic brass bands and collective singing traditions played important roles in struggling for bodily autonomy and new social relations formulated in opposition to the profit motive. I coin this felt solidarity ‘affective consensus,’ which was a consensus-based decision-making process activated by agreed-upon musical conventions. Its power lies in its historical connections between democratic traditions of assembly, workplace struggles, and forms of participatory music making— all emblematic of late nineteenth-century Black New Orleans.

Keywords
Jazz, labor movement, Black studies, New Orleans, Civil War, affective consensus

On April 15th, 1984, the Black communist activist Richard Bradley climbed a 50-foot flagpole at San Francisco’s Civic Center, located under the shadow of then-mayor Diane Feinstein’s offices. His objective was to tear down the city’s Confederate flag, which had flown unchallenged for too long. He was draped in the uniform of a Union Army soldier, invoking the weight of history and the pull of the present. After Bradley brought it down, the air was literally set ablaze as the
flag was burned by a representative of the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen Union Local 6, Pete Woolston.\footnote{Several ILWU members were from, or descended from, Black New Orleanians as part of the second great migration in 1940s-50s. Conversation with historian Peter Cole, October 13, 2023. The flag was officially removed not long after.}

The crowd gathered was electrified, and not just by this act itself. As if conjured from the very soil that remembered the steps of the enslaved and the oppressed, a rousing chorus of ‘John Brown’s Body’ rang out—an anthem that had united Black troops against Confederate enslavers during the Civil War over a century earlier. This wasn’t merely a song; it was an invocation, a spirit, and the unbreakable bond of a historical legacy made real in performance. This motley crew of mixed-race trade unionists, communists, and socialists became the diverse voices of a harmonious outcry of liberation and defiance. Richard Bradley and Pete Woolston, despite their impending arrest, were encircled by this choir of solidarity. The multitude’s sonorous crescendo was a shield, a communal assertion that while they might be detained, the spirit of their act and the song of the people were not so easily caged. Bradley might have been the local hero, but it was this music, the collective voice, that bore testament to the struggles, hopes, and aspirations of a community in struggle (Workers Vanguard 2015). ‘Rather than understand how social movements “mobilize” music,’ writes Andrew Snyder, ‘the relationship between festive and political practices is much more dynamic, interactive, and, in an important sense, inseparable’ (Snyder 2022, 14). Certainly, this interdependence was audible as Black liberation activists and unionized longshoremen ceremonialized their alliance through collective musicking (Small 1998).

The actions of Bradley and Woolston, and the words of Snyder, help reorient the conceptual terrain of an oft-discussed musical phenomenon: New Orleans’s Black brass bands at the turn of the twentieth century. Black sound—as affect, as community, as catharsis, and as embodiment of the antinomies of modernity—has been considered in a long and distinguished body of scholarship (e.g., Gantt 2022; Gilroy 1993; Moten 2003; Okiji 2018). This study argues that exploring the transition from plantation enslavement to the formation of a Black proletariat enriches our understanding of Black sound and music. This history, evoked by Bradley through the Union army outfit he wore and the song that supported his direct action, encompassed both Radical Reconstruction—the decade of Black political power in the post-Civil War South whereby multiracial legislatures passed some of South’s most progressive state constitutions in United States history—and the counterrevolutionary alliance of capitalism and white supremacist violence that overthrew these governments, described by white Southerners as ‘Redemption’ (Davis 2022; Du Bois 1935; Foner 1988).

Defining the modalities by which these transitions were lived and resisted requires a renewed understanding of the political. Both ‘history from below’ (Rediker 2020) and studies of affect share overlapping insights on this matter. As Robin
D.G. Kelley explains, ‘Writing “history from below” that emphasizes the infrapolitics of the black working class requires that we substantively redefine politics’ (Kelley 1996, 8). Kelley rejects the dichotomization of ‘formal’ politics from the daily aspirations and experiences of African Americans and writes that one’s identification with resistance can become a lived experience. This might include ‘issues of economic well-being, safety, pleasure, cultural expression, sexuality, freedom of mobility, and other facets of daily life. Politics is not separate from lived experience or the imaginary world of what is possible; to the contrary, politics is about these things’ (Kelley 1996, 8).

Kelley’s call for an expanded and quotidian understanding of political activity is complemented by recent works on musical affect which also challenge more traditional notions of politics (Guilbault 2019; Muniagurria and Cobra 2023; Schiermer 2021). The scholarship of Noriko Manabe (2019) and Ana Hofman (2021), in particular, has provided foundational insights into protest music and sound, contributing significantly to our understanding of how affective interventions are essential components of social movements. Hofman, for instance, argues that affective interventions generated by sonic politics can point to ‘a radical reshaping of our understanding of where and how we search for political potentialities in the current crisis of political agency.’ Hofman’s work theorizes and contextualizes affect ‘as a tool for grasping the broader shifts in the very understanding of what is political’ (Hofman 2020, 303).

Inspired by these resonant and overlapping interventions, this essay considers the strike as an affective intervention, animated as much by concrete demands for higher wages as by the assortment of performance practices through which freedom dreams were sowed (Kelly 2002). These turn-of-the century strikes significantly expanded both the bargaining position and cultural space of New Orleans’s Black working class. By successfully shutting down the city’s ports for significant periods, strikers created spaces of interracial solidarity and Black political power in an era of white supremacist backlash. But these strikes also operated through affective interactions where, much like improvised musical performances, bodies and events ‘co-compose[d]’ one another (Stover 2017). The lived experience of the strike that was especially impactful for participants. Strikes, particularly through picket lines or workplace takeovers, are potent demonstrations of collective consciousness, in which group solidarity is both the strike’s condition of possibility and produced in the act of striking itself. In his consideration of the activist event, Brian Massumi argues that ‘the “subjective” is not something preexisting to which an event occurs…[but] the self-occurring form of the event,’ (Massumi 2011, 8). Such a perspective helps us think affect in terms of the interplay between bodies and events. If we accept this view, then we can see why a strike can be such a powerful affective moment. The strike as an event does not simply unfold in isolation; it orchestrates an intricate interplay among diverse groups through a militant and participatory protest culture. This orchestration,

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2 On strikes as a cultural form, see Wells 2020.
which Luis-Manuel García (2020) terms ‘affective attunement,’ is unique in its capacity to bring together various constituents. Shared affect fosters a unified commitment to struggle, knitting together different experiences and perspectives into a shared cause—in this case, affective attunement consolidates strikers’ collective commitment to struggle, as a new world is simultaneously felt and envisioned through slogans and sensorial experience.

Here it must be emphasized that collective music-making was essential to these strikes. Brass bands played frequently at strikes, protests, and funerals for dockworkers who were killed by police as a response to labor militancy. This expansion of political space and expressive culture took place through a dialectic of collaborative organizing and collective musical performance, a practice I describe as brassroots democracy. Brassroots democracy refers to the conjoined acts of participatory, democratic assembly; collective music making rooted in Afrodiastoric artistic traditions; and the reterritorialization of enclosure into commons through interdisciplinary procession (Barson 2024).

In becoming affectively harmonized through collective musical action and participatory democracy, Black workers reaffirmed a cultural practice decades—if not centuries—in the making. I refer to this practice as ‘affective consensus,’ whereby Black soldiers, workers, and activists signaled and reinforced communal commitments to multigenerational movements for social transformation. Within the Black labor movement, affective consensus was constructed through the emergent sounds of brass bands and polyphonic chants that synchronized each participant’s intention. From Civil War campfires to Reconstruction marching bands, affective consensus was a critical modality of Black organizing. In the workplace, the wartime arena, and on the streets of New Orleans, longtime comrades and complete strangers alike developed renewed definitions of freedom, built strategies for obtaining it, and most centrally to this discussion, innovated democratic processes by which to arrive at the political content of such movements. The socio-sonic creative methodologies through which these commitments became encoded—commitments which were continuously reactivated through performance—were a compelling parallel to the Black working-class governance structure that the Longshoremen’s Protective Union Benevolent Association constructed (Arnesen 1991; Rosenberg 1988). That is to say, the practice of collective musical improvisation was deeply linked to an emergent practice of workplace democracy.

In addition to modelling democratic processes, music-infused strikes were noteworthy because of their ability to remap racialized geographies and fashion new social ecologies rooted in non-capitalist, cooperative labor. It was precisely resonating bodies, through sound and chant, that appropriated capitalist space was refashioned for class struggle and self-realization. Emancipation, as Jacques Rancière underscores, entails ‘shaping for oneself a new body and a new sensorium’ (Rancière 2008, 10). In turn of the twentieth-century New Orleans, we might therefore evaluate strikes ‘successful’ with a metric beyond increased wages.
or reduced hours. Such material gains were certainly essential. Without them, indeed, these strikes had no objective. Yet strikes inscribed information in a hidden affective ledger, incrusted in the lived experiences of those who participated, expressed in the confidence and sense of community they collectively built, and reproduced in the cultural forms that their determined (and sometimes joyful) disobedience inspired. Through ways of speaking, walking, remembering, storytelling, and music-making, Black aesthetics became vessels for the affective experiences of the strike. They expressed the confidence and sense of community they collectively built. They reproduced the cultural forms that their determined (and sometimes joyful) disobedience instantiated. They inspired communities’ lasting commitment to the labor movement, pointing to new forms of subjectivity and collective consciousness, evidenced by the multiple sectors who became involved in direct action. A group of New Orleans Black women, for instance, forcibly destroyed the cart and mule getups of strike-breaking scab longshoremen in 1907 (Rosenberg 1988). Others stole food from white men’s kitchens to help sustain strikers and their families (Ameringer 1940). Future jazz musicians, like the clarinetist Willie Parker, reaffirmed his labor solidarity some fifty years after he participated in a strike (Parker 1958). This lasting commitment, modelled on affective engagements, was irreducibly musical—a manifestation of ‘how … musical communities come to articulate themselves as social movements’ (Snyder 2022, 14); or, in other words, this lasting commitment was a transfiguration of music’s ability to ‘rehearse identities, stances, and social relations not yet permissible in politics’ (Lipsitz 1994, 137). This fusion of Black music and union organizing was an expression of a longer historical process, a practice of utopia whose ‘basic desire,’ is ‘to conjure up and enact new modes of friendship, happiness, and solidarity that are consequent on the overcoming of the racial oppression on which modernity and its antimony of rational, western progress as excessive barbarity relied’ (Gilroy 1993, 3).

These modalities of affective consensus—whether enacted by modelling democratic decision-making processes, remapping urban and human space, or creating new aesthetics and social relations that expressed the utopic vision of the Black working class—were mobilized in a specific and highly charged historic context. On the docks of late-nineteenth century New Orleans, this was the revamped capitalism of the New South (Ayers 1992; Woodward 1951). At the very moment Jim Crow was ascendant, international shipping firms inserted themselves into the economy and politics of turn-of-the-century New Orleans, as the region transitioned from an economy rooted in slavery to one based on wage labor. Hours and minutes became increasingly rationalized and instrumentalized into tools for profit. The idea that time was now something to be ‘owned’ by capitalist bosses was antithetical to the Black workers, many of whom had earned their hard-won liberation through Civil War military service. W. E. B. Du Bois considered the Black working class’s resistance to alienated time a significant intervention. He argued that African American workers contributed a philosophical ‘gift’ which was ‘usually known as “laziness”’
and predicted that its ‘contribution to current economics will be recognized as of
tremendous and increasing importance’ (Du Bois 1924, 14, 26–27).

This ‘gift’—an embodied resistance to capitalist work-time discipline—was
prefigured in the Black Civil War experience, where African American freedmen
developed practices of affective consensus that striking, congregating, and labor
organizing later martialed. In the following pages, I offer a possible history for its
genesis and its implications for a theory of affect in dialogue with a materialist
reading of racial capitalism. I then consider the ways the ‘affective turn’ can help
us to understand New Orleans’s late nineteenth-century Black dockworker
movement, highlighting both the works of specific musicians and notable social
movements through which communal affective politics consolidated a resistant
subjectivity during a moment of socioeconomic transition. I conclude by thinking
through how the Black workers’ self-activity might complicate the claims of the
affective turn, pointing to a synthesis of affect and the epistemic-utopian
conception of freedom dreams (Kelley 2002).

The Sonic Legacies of Consensus
Black Civil War Soundscapes
During the Civil war, songs were power. Shared in the contracting diaphragms
and vibrating vocal cords of millions of formerly enslaved people, songs openly
articulated self-assertion, communal joy, and a disdain for the aristocratic
behaviors of their former enslavers. They evidenced Paul Gilroy’s argument that
music was unique among the arts as capable of ‘express[ing] a direct image of the
slaves’ will (Gilroy 1993, 74).’ Even being able to congregate for public singing
was, itself, a right that had not been observed during slavery, and Wilbert Jenkins
notes that this ‘new fruit of liberty’ was above all enjoyed by ‘freedmen from the
rural areas, where gathering in large groups without the presence of whites had
been proscribed by the conspiracy-conscious white community’ (Jenkins 1998, 38).
According to accounts of freedpeople, they walked—sometimes as much as fifteen
miles—to congregate, and often created and shared music as they approached
sites of meeting and celebration (The Loyal Georgian, April 10, 1867; Sterling 1994,
100).

These eruptions of sonic jubilee could be either spontaneous or highly
choreographed. One white clergyman, in an 1865 report on the ‘History of the
Difficulties … of the Front Street Methodist Church,’ recalled how ‘The whole
city seems to be alive with ‘Africans’ of all sorts and sizes and sexes and ages. They
sing and shout; and preach and pray; and drink and swear; and fiddle and dance;
and laugh and yell—‘Ye-ah, ye-ah’ de bottom rail on de top at las!!!’ (Burkhead
1909, 64; Jackson 2016, 23). Frank Moore, a Civil War journalist who specialized
in song collection, similarly recorded ‘men [who] danced in jubilation, the women
[who] screamed and went into hysterics, then and there, on the sidewalks. And
their sable brethren in arms marched past, proud and erect, singing their ‘John
Brown’ hymn, where it was never sung before’ (Moore 1889, 187). Surely, as
Solomon Northup recalls in *Twelve Years a Slave*, music and mobility were crucial parts of antebellum Black life (Northup 1853). But not like this. Black people across the country—freemen from Boston and former slaves from Colleton Country—freely made music together in a revolutionary conjuncture. Antebellum prohibitions on drums, trumpets, and anti-planter lyrics evaporated, along with the social order that had kept African Americans enslaved.

Freedpeople thus laid the groundwork for a radical transformation of Southern society whereby cultural expression was inherently political. Even the riding of horses, mules, or in carriages in the presence of whites were expressions of a massive sociological shift (Williamson 1965, 47). Collective music making reproduced this new infrastructure of feeling as much in mass meetings as at dances, blurring the lines between both (Gilmore 2022; Hunter 1997). A growing body of literature has cast light on these African American commemorations as more communities today celebrate Juneteenth (Johnson 2021; Brown 1994; Clark 2015; Glymph 2008; Behrend 2015; Blight 1989; Savage 1997).

This Civil War culture of politicized celebration was prefigured and developed by Black soldiers themselves. Colonel Samuel Armstrong was one of many who observed freedmen soldiers who ‘sang at night around their camp fires’ (Wilson 2002, 154). Other officers described how the songs of their Black regiments shared beauty, pathos, and distinct commentary on current events. One feature of these aural epistemologies (Jabir 2017) lay in their invocation of the polyphonic, multilayered voicings of the Black Church, spaces where some of the first realizations of Black autonomy were realized in the Civil War arena (Hurston 2007; Hunter 1997). Colonel Higginson noted that one spiritual shared around campfires, ‘Go in the Wilderness,’ became the unit’s ‘best marching song, and one which was invaluable to lift their feet along’ (Higginson 1870, 211). The Harlem Renaissance writer and composer James Weldon Johnson similarly threaded the link between spirituals and liberation-suffused valences of brass instruments when he penned a poem dedicated to the spiritual ‘Go Down Moses’:

Mark its bars,
How like a mighty trumpet-call they stir the blood.
Such are the notes that men have sung
Going to valorous deeds; such tones there were
That helped make history when Time was young.

(Johnson 2000, 55)

Johnson linked Black brass with the collective singing of spirituals because the communal character of Black religious singing was reproduced in African
American band performance. Black soldiers who had once toiled on disparate plantations or within far-away cities created a unique sonic space that forged a collective musical language. Colonel George E. Sutherland described how one night, ‘a little distance from a camp fire,’ he heard ‘one deep rich voice,’ whose refrain was taken up by another ‘two or three,’ then ‘taken up by half a dozen,’ until finally, ‘you are lifted as by a Creation chorus, for now they are fifty voices, and with such wonderful, deep, rich melody’ (Sutherland 1891, 183).

These same soldiers soon performed brass instruments in a variety of Civil War contexts—battlefields, dances, marches, and celebrations. These musical contexts were spaces of ceaseless negotiation, as musicians innovated procedural mechanisms that ensured sound agreeable to all. One example of this is found in an account written by Colonel Henry Goddard Thomas. ‘Important news,’ he wrote, ‘was usually followed by a long silence. They [Black soldiers] sat about in groups, “studying,” as they called it,’ and would set the news of political developments to music. If their melodies ‘met general acceptance,’ then ‘one voice after another would chime in,’ creating harmonies and rendering a new song, soon to be a part of a collectively created songbook (Thomas 1887, 777–779). African American musician soldiers thus constructed communal affect through the interrelationship of their voices, lungs, diaphragms. Achieving sonic resonance was dependent on achieving affective consensus, for if the singer ‘did not strike a sympathetic chord in his hearers, if they did not find in his utterance the exponent of their idea, he would sing it again and again’ until achieving unanimity (Thomas 1887, 777–779). As Thomas’s recollection of ‘studying’ suggests, this mode of musical production was one means by which Black soldiers constructed a shared political analysis. This was not the Rancièrian definition of consensus—what he describes as the ‘erasing the contestatory, conflictual nature of the very givens of common life’ that ‘reduces political difference to police-like homogeneity’ (Rancière 2010, 7). To the contrary, affective consensus was a process that depended on the airing of dissonance and dissidence. These sensorial documents were a robust, ever evolving expression of Black soldiers’ political subjectivity and could be continually refined, revisited, and rethought through collective improvisation.

Ana Hofman considers these moments of collective singing to be indicative of undertheorized political activism. ‘[S]inging is presumed to be “soft activism” or even “apolitical” and therefore less threatening to those in power,’ she notes. ‘But it is precisely as an apparently mundane and joyful activity that choral performing enables a powerful mobilization. The strong embodied and sensory experience of collective singing is able to build ad hoc collectivities on a spatial and temporal scale that have profound political potentials or may even challenge the traditional notions of politics and the political’ (Hofman 2021, 161). This ‘ontology of vibration and resonance’ heralded a synesthetic, multisensorial political mobilization, as sensorial experience facilitated a culture of Black Civil War sonic solidarity (Garcia 2015, 2020). Black soldiers would soon channel these vocalized solidarities into a campaign for equal pay in the military, whose news was
disseminated through campfire song, culminating in a victory for Black soldiers despite violent repression (Friedrich 1988, 64–73; Higginson 1870, 221).

African American vocal improvisatory traditions fused affective and socio-political dimensions of Black music making. These practices were soon an important part of Black Reconstruction. Sonic works authored by communal processes ran parallel to the participatory democratic character of mass meetings—held on former plantations and in the halls of state legislatures alike—characterized by the act of assembly (Behrend 2015; Hardt and Negri 2017; Sanchez 2022). Assembly refers to a participatory process of decision making in which consensus is both a goal in itself and a means for developing new political subjectivities. During Reconstruction, Black legislators and activists developed several techniques which signaled their commitment to this participatory model, including a procedural mechanism which prohibited any one person to speak for more than five minutes uninterrupted (Pike 1874, 11). Here it is essential to distinguish capital-D ‘Democracy,’ which United States institutions have fought to symbolically monopolize, from the radical act of assembly. ‘The freedom of assembly,’ write Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, ‘also marks an alternative mode of the production of subjectivity, characterizing both what we do and who we are’ (Hardt and Negri 2017, 295). This participatory model is realized through communal antiphony which continuously negotiates the contradictions between representation, popular sovereignty, and collective decision making. From the Levellers in seventeenth-century England to the modern-day Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, assembly has been core to several radical horizontal movements across the world, and its realization during Reconstruction was prefigured in the communal musical creation process heard in Civil War campfires and later in Reconstruction brass bands (Fitzwater 2019; Foxley 2013, 231; Behrend 2015; Barson 2024).

In these conjunctures, a new political practice was birthed from the womb of affective consensus, weaving together bodies, sound, and subjectivities into a tapestry of renewed relationality. These musical enactments, far more than monosensorial auditory experiences, created the conditions for consensus-driven governance and self-determination. By creating the conditions of possibility for Black decision making and autonomy, these forms of music making were nothing less than a technology of communing whose affective legacies would be realized on the docks of New Orleans—where the process of assembly further conjoined with Afrodispaoric music making traditions through the intertwined socio-musical practice of brassroots democracy.

**Labor and Sound**

**Post-Reconstruction Brassroots Democracy**

Black organized labor in Louisiana was an important node in the expansion of brassroots democracy’s communitarian, justice-infused practice. As early as 1874, music accompanied labor unrest in the sugar parishes. On January 5th of that year,
sugar workers went on strike at Zion Church, near Houma, when strikers demanded a $20 a month minimum wage with rations. Beyond wages, they proposed restructuring the entire system of land tenure—strikers proposed forming sub-associations to own or rent land collectively (Rodrigue 2001). This movement was coordinated with Black activists in Reconstruction government. William H. ‘Hamp’ Keyes, a Black Republican representative for Terrebonne, encouraged the strikers to occupy plantations so that scabs could not replace their labor. The strikers then marched throughout the city, ‘with fife and drum,’ invoking Civil War musical ensembles and connecting Black sugar workers’ struggles on plantations to the spirit of abolition (Thibodaux Sentinel, January 17, 24, 1874; Rodrigue 2001, 162). Planters took note of this fusion of bands with Black labor. In 1887, Black bands were banned after striking plantation workers outside of Thibodaux were brutally massacred, leading the Afro-Creole bandleader John Robichaux to move to New Orleans, along with hundreds of other Black workers (Vernhettes and Lindstörm 2012, 13). The fusion of expressive culture and political organizing is therefore apparent in the beginning of Black organized labor, including in its censure. The forty thousand rural-to-urban migrants that moved to New Orleans brought with them hard-won lessons from these decades of counter-plantation mobilization. One of these was the importance of collective music making to maintain solidarity in the face of violent repression (Brothers 2006, 87).

Black labor’s musical militancy was a connective thread from rural Louisiana to the docks of New Orleans. In 1872, Black longshoremen first organized into a union, named the Longshoremen’s Protective Union Benevolent Association (LPUBA). It soon became the nation’s largest Black union (Arnesen 1991, 189). Upon their founding, the LPUBA organized a dock strike with their white counterparts. The following call announced their intentions:

Notice is hereby given to the public, coal merchants, stevedores and contractors in particular, that the Longshoremen’s Protective Union and United Laborers’ Chartered Societies do, on the seventeenth day of October, 1872, strike for wages and regular hours of work...[we cannot spare] so much as a single dollar from our daily wages to aid or support a sick wife or child, or a sick friend, without depriving ourselves of the same amount of bread to eat; so, therefore, we notify the public that on the seventeenth day of October, 1872, we strike for $4 per day, from the Barracks to Carrollton.

Under our charter, Longshoremen’s Protective Union

T. MATTHEWS,
At this early phase of the Black dockworker’s labor movement, music already figured prominently, for the strike was also a processional march. Bands accompanied the strike from its departure. As the *New Orleans Republican* reported,

> Carrying out the above proclamation, the members yesterday failed to go to work, keeping their promise to strike for higher wages—$4 per day. Hundreds of the strikers assembled on the levee at an early hour, as if to make a public demonstration. One large squad had a band of music, and carried a flag, the participants bearing themselves like men who ‘meant business’ (*New Orleans Republican*, October 18, 1872).

The strikers, draped in the thick multiphonics of overlapping cornets and trombones, soon encountered a stevedore name Captain Barnes. Barnes was directing non-striking scab longshoremen to load the barges of the Mississippi Valley Transportation Company. Barnes refused to stop work, leading to a violent confrontation with the strikers. ‘At about twelve o’clock the procession of strikers passed up, preceded by a band of music, and with flags flying, the men in the procession some 1000 or 2000 strong. The crowd again halted at the barge [which Captain Barnes and his workers was loading] and demanded that the laborers should quit, threatening violence in case they did not obey.’ Barnes attacked the strikers with a hatchet; he lost control of the battle and was stoned to death (*New Orleans Republican*, October 22, 1872).

The presence of a band in multiple parts of the march, including at the initiation of this confrontation, suggests that the musicians who performed in these routes were deeply engrained in the docklabor movement, and some bore witness to the dramatic battles of the era. Indeed, trumpeter Joe “King” Oliver was one of several musicians who worked on the docks and ‘performed on the job’ (Sayles 1959). Willie Parker, a dockworker and early jazz clarinetist, still supported strikers decades after his own involvement in the movement. In a 1958 interview, he remembered his days as a labor activist. When he shared how a replacement scab laborer had been killed by the strikers, he proclaimed: ‘[they] ought to kill all them old scabs, people striking and they don’t wanna help them out’ (Parker 1958). Parker’s commitment to solidarity was common-sense and was reiterated with a directness that was unnerving to the interviewers.

In the 1872 strike, during a dangerous moment, the band did more than provide excitement. The paper concluded that ‘the strikers … maintained themselves free
from intoxication onto an unusual extent, and seemed fully under the disciplined
control of their leaders up to the time of the murderous assault on Captain
Barnes’ (New Orleans Republican, October 22, 1872). The organizational element of
the strike—led by not only bands, but also marshals who held flags shouted ‘four
dollars a day or nothing’—were direct invocations of the Civil War brass band
celebrations and the political-musical activity of Reconstruction. Their symbolic
deployment ensured that the traditions of grassroots democracy were rearticulated
and reimagined within the Black labor movement. The cohesion of the marchers
and their single-mindedness reflects the power of the affective consensus that their
collective music-making contributed to. This coordination was palpable to the
reporters on the scene.

The accompaniment of music influenced the disposition of the strikers while
remapping the social relations of the docks. The act of reordering the capitalist
city’s spatial logic was itself a significant intervention that merits comment. As
Rancière reminds us, ‘everything in politics turns on the distribution of spaces …
political action always acts upon the social as the litigious distribution of places
and roles’ (Rancière 2003, 201). In a similar vein, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o explains
how ‘[t]he nation-state sees the entire territory as its performance area; it
organizes the space as a huge enclosure, with definite places of entrance and exit
… the state performs power’ (Thiong’o 1998, 21, 12). The physical, emotive, and
spatial dimensions of brass band music provided the strikers a tactical edge in
disrupting the state’s control and manipulation of space (Rancière 2013; Bøhler
2021). Their multilayered textures of cornets and baritones, and the percussive
insistence of snare and bass drums, resonated throughout the city streets, from the
docks into the heart of the city, ensuring the affective attunement of strikers as
they became ‘musical-object[s]-as-bodies’ (Stover 2017, 12).

As brass bands reordered the spatial configuration of the city, they communicated
their struggle to the broader public. As Kjetil Klette Bøhler notes, ‘engaging
grooves and catchy melodies do important political work by creating affective
communities and new expressions of critique’ (Bøhler 2021, 186), and for those
who could not be physically present on the march route, New Orleans residents
still heard the faint, and then suddenly present, sounds of horns, drums, and the
combined voices of slogans. Perhaps this helps explain why, in the following days,
coal heavers, roustabouts, and railroad workers also went on strike. Lawrence
Grossberg considers such (re)territorialization practices as those that can convey a
‘resonance or rhythm that articulates, coordinates, or communicates across
milieus, so that aspects of portions of the different milieus come together at a
different level from the milieus themselves’ (Grossberg 2010, 31–32). That is,
workers from other industries became transformed by participating in the affective
moment of the strike, as dockworkers’ anthems became their own.

It is unsurprising, then, that the dockworkers’ strike soon generated support from
working-class New Orleans writ large. When the police arrested two or three of
the strike leaders, a ‘crowd of thousands’ rescued them from the police station
Both Black and white workers defied the police force, and the shipping interests with which it had identified, through this temporary abolition of carceral institutions. These images invoke Walter Benjamin’s notion of the ‘proletarian general strike,’ which ‘sets itself the sole task of annihilating state violence’ (Benjamin 1977, 193–194; Hamacher 1994, 1146). The strikers created a cultural phenomenon larger than themselves: they activated significant sectors of New Orleans in solidarity precisely through the communing and commoning ethos expressed through the aesthetic devices of Black brass bands. Brass band music sonically embodied a powerful solidarity and inspired those on the side-lines to participate. Suddenly, the docks were not siphons of value extracted from overworked roustabouts and longshoremen, but were refashioned as spaces of struggle that resisted the atomizing violence of capital.

Striker-supporting musicians proposed a brassroots alternative to racial capitalism, rooted in the democratic ethos of the Black radical tradition (Robinson 2000). These were indeed moments that dramatized, in the words of a Black longshoreman active in the era, Thomas Woodland, ‘The class-conscious power of capital with all its camp-followers … confronted with the class-conscious power of labor.’ For Woodland, strikes affirmed a sense of collectivity that had no bounds: ‘There is no power on earth strong enough to thwart the will of such a majority conscious of itself. The earth and all its wealth belong to all’ (Woodland 1915, n.p.). Woodland was inspired by the strikes that Black dockworkers orchestrated, whose appropriations of space were also a commoning act. These strikes were therefore learning communities, which laid bare what is usually abstract and hegemonic: in the words of Rosa Luxemburg, strikes are artistic interventions which paint (and demystify) the ‘gigantic, many-colored picture of a general arrangement of labor and capital’ (Luxemburg 1971, 29). While Luxemburg emphasizes the strike’s visuality, accounts of striking workers who marched through the New Orleans docks opens our ears to how sonic vibrations and dissident temporalities defined the strike’s lived experience for many New Orleanians. ‘The strike,’ writes Sarah Ann Wells, ‘inaugurates new temporalities that allow us to see, or perhaps an encounter between temporalities that are usually lived as separate’ (Wells 2020, 500, emphasis mine). This relationship between invented and remixed temporalities — experiences mediated by the event and affect—and ‘sight,’ connected to political analysis and new ways of understanding the world—enhances one’s capacity to act. It strikingly illustrates how felt relations can become incubators of new forms of knowledge. In a similar vein, in his discussion of anarchist strikes in early twentieth-century São Paulo, Francisco Foot-Hardman argues that the strike ‘allows, if only for a brief moment, a reencounter between historic and poetic time,’ ‘between the permanent, never resolved tensions, between art and politics’ (Foot-Hardman 2002, 175–76). In the context of Black New Orleanians’ recent proletarianization, the strike was thus an opening for supressed forms of social relation to be activated through musical procession, where atmospheres of felt relations became inscribed in kinaesthetic affect. The faithful vessel for these practices of polyphonic solidarity was the
twinned takeover of public space and brass band performance: grassroots democracy.

Rethinking strikes through the lens of recent literature on the musical affect of protest can greatly enrich our sense of how these processions organized bodies and attuned new forms of political knowledge (Hofman 2021; Manabe 2019). Yet it is important to also underscore the political organizing that makes a strike or protest possible. This less romanticized, sometimes tedious political activity complicates the ‘spontaneous’ sense of the subjective which permeates literature on affect. In the case of Black unions, strikers had earlier developed mutual aid and resource mechanisms which partially paid back missed days of work. They prepared for police violence. They elected leaders to represent them in negotiations with capitalist shipping firms (Ameringer 1940; Arnesen 1991; Rosenberg 1998). And, yes, they recruited and rehearsed bands. It is therefore important to emphasize that the organizing that made the strike an affective event unfolded over a longer period than the event of the strike itself. Even if one could argue that each of these components is still a subjective ‘event’—organizing the meeting, the transcribing and dissemination of the minutes of said meeting, negotiations with industry bosses, to name a few—these organizing events nonetheless congeal through communications that are internalized by individuals who are not always “beside” each other in the room (Sedgwick 2003, 9).

David Graeber critiques ethnographic literature that only highlights the affective event—the protest itself—while eclipsing the less overtly affective organizing that goes into preparing these marches. ‘[They] show activists marching down the street chanting ‘this is what democracy looks like,’ but contain no images of anyone actually practicing democracy,’ he explains.

The result is a peculiar disconnect. When activists talk to each other, they tend to talk endlessly about ‘process’—the nuts and bolts of direct democracy. While preparing for a major action, it seems all one does is go to meetings, trainings, more meetings. But, when one reads accounts of the same action written afterwards, almost all of this tends to disappear (Graeber 2009, 11).

Put in terms of this discussion, we might ask: does a meeting with a debate over the linguistic nuances of a manifesto constitute, and emanate from, a particular affect? Is this affect produced and reproduced through the performatory act of writing manifestos or meeting notes (Barad 2007, 139–141)? Are tension, boredom, and conviction the primary affective modalities by which these endless ‘nuts and bolts’ became hashed out? Wherever one locates the affective aspects of these various organizing conjunctures, it must be acknowledged that the production and experience of affect in these meeting spaces is qualitatively different from the type of defiant, adrenaline-soaked joy that one experiences in a
mass protest or picket-line strike. Reflecting on the intricacies of organizing a strike reveals a spectrum of effort, from the logistical mundane to the confrontational majestic. Black unions in New Orleans are exemplary in this regard because they were both musical entities as well as more traditional labor organizations. The LPUBA often hosted dances for their rank and file. The African American cornetist Buddy Bolden, a semi-mythic figure in early jazz, was a regular fixture at the concerts held at LPUBA-run Longshoreman’s Hall (Marquis 2005, 67–103; Rosenberg 1988, 63). These relationships were fostered at the institutional level. One LPUBA president, William Penn, had previously been the manager of the popular Excelsior Brass Band (New Orleans Louisianian, July 9, 1881). In short, affective consensus harnessed the political force of sensorial experiences that exceeded the semiotic, while also tapping into the performative interventions of language (Barad 2007). Both aggregated into political events. Through the combination of sound and solidarity, strikes extended the semiotic and sonic workplace democracy to the streets—a culmination of meetings suddenly experienced by strikers and their allied counterpublics through a rehearsed, resonant, multivalent sound (Warner 2002; Dawson 1994).

How do we reconcile these two distinct genealogies of affect—spontaneous and rehearsed; improvised and carefully planned; resonating bodies in processional marches and still bodies in endless meetings? This ever-evolving dialectic between musical affect and political organizing is evidenced by various observations that Black union meetings were themselves musical. The New Orleans Picayune reported in 1903 that one dockworker gathering sounded like a ‘revival meeting broken loose in the Longshoremen’s Hall’: ‘the closing act of the meeting was the singing of the old rally hymn of the organization, and every man in the hall joined in. The swell of voices could be heard for blocks away’ (New Orleans Times Picayune, September 9, 1903). In another instance, the German immigrant socialist Oscar Ameringer recalled that in one meeting of Black dockworkers he heard how an organizer connected to union members through an affective musicality. ‘[T]he audience warmed up, [and] there came responses such as now he’s talking, now he’s talking Tell ’em, Tell ’em. Their responses were harmonized somewhat in the manner of negro spirituals.’ Ameringer describes these harmonic calls and responses as part of a political consensus achieved through affect, as styles of vocality reminded each striker of their shared commitment to strike, despite the deprivation of much-needed resources it implied. ‘[O]nce I heard them chanting,’ he remembered, ‘I knew they would stick for another week’ (Ameringer 1940, 198–199). The organizing illustrates the dual character of affect: as both immediate,

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3 For that matter, the affective modalities of meetings and trainings is also quite different from panicked desperation that can grip a protest or strike in the face of state or paramilitary repression.

4 These legacies were evident decades later, when, in 1940s San Francisco, ILWU founder Harry Bridges opened the basement of the CIO (of which he was then a member) for African American New Orleans migrant Bunk Johnson to perform. Johnson had been unable to secure gigs in traditional San Francisco clubs due to racial discrimination. Bridges, who played mandolin, had spent time in New Orleans, and heard in Crescent City jazz a resonant metaphor for working class solidarity (Cherny 2023, 8, 14, 218, 337).
spontaneous reaction, and a carefully woven expression dependent on meticulous preparation and rehearsal. In the case of New Orleans’ Black unions, the cycle of ‘meetings, trainings, more meetings’ were mediated through the music-infused practice of affective consensus, which was redeployed in strikes themselves.

Not all moments of musical organizing were harmonious, and dissent sometimes overflowed affective consensus’s ability to harness multiple voices. As warring factions within the LPUBA struggled for power in 1905, the control of music and sound became a terrain of ideological struggle. LPUBA President E. S. Swann, described as ‘the leader of the conservatives and one of the best-known colored men along the docks … loudest in his condemnation of the belligerent or radical element’, legitimized his leadership through his ability to host concerts (New Orleans Times Picayune, April 2, 1905). ‘When I became President’ he explained in an interview, ‘I found [Longshoreman’s] hall closed, and permission denied us to give balls and entertainments.’ Swann rebooked concerts with the permission of the city and promised the New Orleans police that he ‘held the bad crowd down’, that is, repressed the radicals within the union. In response, the radical faction attacked union conservatives during a concert. ‘They got the best of us on Mardi Gras night,’ explained Swann, ‘and killed one of our good men’ (New Orleans Times Picayune, April 2, 1905). Both the radicals who attacked Swann, and the musicians that Swann hosted, expressed a working-class culture whose affective interventions —through collective improvisation, behind-the-beat music, and lyrical content— complicated the stability (a metonym for co-existence with capital) that Swann hoped to project. The episode recalls Jacques Attali’s theorization on the interrelationship between sound, violence, and social change. ‘[T]he origins of music will be located in ritual murder…[it is] an attribute of political and religious power, and that it thereby signified order, but at the same time foretold the latter’s subversion’ (Attali 1983, 7). Thus, even when affective consensus was unable to remix dissent and dissonance through musical co-creation, union leadership and rank-and-file workers struggled to control its meaning. This performative musicality permeated every single aspect of the union and union activism, from internal debates at meetings, to concerts, to strikes.

Whether in union halls or in the streets, brass bands and group singing expressed a praxis enacted by the Black working class. Both forms of music making were capable of occupying capitalist, racialized space through collective sound. Their white antagonists certainly found both threatening. Marching bands were frequently targeted for both state repression and paramilitary violence (Berry 2018, 181). Meanwhile, the conservative, white supremacist periodical the Daily Democrat complained in 1880 that Black labor’s campaign ‘rest[ed] on the “40 cents an hour” song,’ referencing how their demand for a minimum wage was popularized through collective singing and music (The New Orleans Daily Democrat, April 6, 1880). It is a shame that no more information is provided than this. Were instruments played to accompany the song? Was it set to the melody of a spiritual, or was the tune something entirely original? Was there a call and response component? Yet we do know that chants like the ‘40 cents an hour’ song are
powerful ‘channels of communication’ that, according to Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, can ‘conjure up long-lost movements from extinction, as well as reawakening forgotten structures of feeling’ (Eyerman and Jamison 1998, 261). Here, it seems, the members of the LPUBA became what Shana Redmond calls ‘citizens of sound’ who challenged their negation of rights by the white republic by creating alternative structures of belonging through collective singing (Redmond 2014, 15). As Noriko Manabe notes, such chants ‘encourage participants to shout and step together with others in ‘social synchrony’, which underpins feelings of social belonging’ (Manabe 2019; on ‘social synchrony’ see Turino 2008, 41–44). Thus, a distinct political consciousness might be expressed through chants like the ‘40 cents an hour’ song, but such chants were also repositories of struggle that could be picked up, like a baton, by future activists, much like Richard Bradley’s invocation of ‘John Brown’s Body’ in 1980s San Francisco.

The affect and physicalities of collective singing—a group activity which synchronized vocal chords, diaphragms, and whole bodies as groups of workers swelled with sound and emotion—has much in common with the socio-sonic experiences generated by parading brass bands. Accounts of Black brass band performances in other contexts can offer us a hint as to what these moments of musical activity during the strike may have felt like to those initially on the sidelines. A memory shared by a young Louis Armstrong helps reconstruct its affect. Armstrong recalls the Onward Brass Band passing through a baseball game he played as a child. In his account, it is the sonic range of this band which shattered the isolation he and other Black youth were confined to; the band transformed the daily lives of community members in the parade’s aural radius. He explains:

McDonald Cemetery was just about a mile away from where the Black Diamonds [Armstrong’s baseball team] was playing the Algiers team. Whenever a funeral from New Orleans had a body to be buried in the McDonald Cemetery, they would have to cross the Canal Street ferryboat and march down the same road right near our ball game. Of course, when they passed us playing a slow funeral march, we only paused with the game and tipped our hats as to pay respect. When the last of the funeral passed we would continue the game. The game was in full force when the Onward Band was returning from the cemetery, after they had put the body in the ground, they were swinging ‘It’s A Long Way to Tipperary.’ They were swinging so good until Joe Oliver reached in the high register beating out those high notes in very fine fashion. And broke our ball [game], Yea! The players commenced to dropping bats and balls…and we all followed them. All the way back to the New Orleans side and to their destination (Armstrong,1960).
Armstrong specifically made a point to comment on the geography of this music on two axes. It was not only Joe Oliver’s heavens-splitting upper register—the verticality of the pitch—but the horizontal distance that the band could be heard. It shattered not only physical distance but social distance, too; they crossed the river, and marched through neighbourhoods where they could not have travelled alone. Matt Sakakeeny refers to these brass bands’ polyphony as ‘braided embroidery,’ whose interwoven lines sound ‘an axis: horizontally, there is a continuum that extends from spoken word to instrumental sound; vertically the sounds are suffused with a density of layers from the opening sermon to the closing second line’ (Sakakeeny, forthcoming). The density of space that these sounds could construct relate to Armstrong’s lived experiences. They help us appreciate how Black brass bands were celebrated for their ability to recover space from apartheid and capital. Armstrong’s description of the power that lay in their sheer spread of volume and range offers hints of how we might hear the brass bands that accompanied the strikers in 1872. They created, much like Joe Oliver and the Onward Brass Band, an ‘atmosphere’ whereby ‘a rhythm or sound translates itself into the environment, and in doing so, modulates a situation in its entirety and pulls all bodies within reach into a relation’ (Riedel 2021, 29). The affective consensus martialled by strikers, through this defiant yet joyful sonic tapestry, spanned miles, touched thousands of minds, and reterritorialized not only the docks but the entirety of New Orleans.

A final study of Black labor’s invocation of brassroots democracy can be gleaned from the United Confederate Veterans’ (UCV) 1903 reunion, held in New Orleans. This story, recounted by historian Mark A. Johnson, is a case study of political power wielded by Black brass bands in the labor movement during the era when jazz was consolidating its stylistic voice (Johnson 2015). The UCV comprised 65,000 out of the 100,000 Confederate veterans still alive at that time, and its presence in New Orleans was greatly anticipated by the city’s white population. In Louisiana and Mississippi, according to one Atlanta newspaper, students in public school had Friday off to ‘witness what they will probably never have a chance to see again’ (Atlanta Constitution, May 5, 1903). At the beginning of the reunion, journalists estimated that 150,000 people would come to New Orleans for the festivities, including ‘tens of thousands of school children’ and 25,000 veterans. Putting forward a revisionist history of the ‘Lost Cause’, veterans aimed to use sound to re-legitimize the enslavers’ cause. ‘The confederate yell that goes up as the procession marches by recalls one of the striking features of the civil war’ intoned one enthralled journalist (Atlanta Constitution, May 5, 1903).

Musical selection for the parade became a flashpoint of both civil rights and labor organizing, with tangible consequences for the development of the labor struggle in the Crescent City. The UCV inadvertently set off this process when it contacted the New Orleans Musicians Union with a request for twenty bands, but no Black or ‘colored’ musicians. The Musicians Union included separate chapters for white and Black musicians, but the two cooperated and shared a charter. Because the
Union could only supply twelve white bands—eight short of the requested twenty—and because Union members were prohibited from playing events with non-union musicians, the Union was obligated to demand Black bands be included in the parade. Confederate veterans had surprisingly mixed views on the subject. For the event’s organizers, the ban on Black musicians was especially necessary—not only because they needed to revive myths of Black inferiority in order to retroactively justify the ‘Lost Cause’ ideology, but also because of the bands’ proximity to white women paraders, whose ‘protection’ from Black bodies was a cornerstone of Redeemer ideology. As Hannah Rosen notes, ‘Both the hopeful visions of former slaves and the terror that ultimately dashed their hopes were frequently expressed through discourse and practices of manhood and womanhood’ (Rosen 2009, 5-6). This gendered rhetoric of race was mobilized in the UCV which, as Johnson notes, ‘put white women in a position with special significance because of their value to the Lost Cause mythology’ (Johnson 2015, 339). The ex-confederates, it seemed, had their own theory of affect, one in which white bodies had to resonate with another in order to remain pure—a whiteness that could be fragmented or contaminated by Black sound. For the organizers of the parade, the Black popular music was still too emblematic of Reconstruction, when radical bands took over streets and soundscapes to inaugurate an interracial, grassroots democracy.5

The Musician’s Union was less divided in its opposition, but it is hard to imagine that this episode would not have caused an internal struggle between its white and Black factions. The parade offered a substantial amount of money and national prestige for participating bands. In addition, white musician-labor activists had to choose between white nationalist politics or their participation in a modern labor movement. The union had already developed collective, institutional mechanisms to promote solidarity, and paid the musicians who turned down the work a compensatory wage. It was thus able to hold the line and overcome a potential rupture provoked by racial capitalism and regimes of scarcity—which would have been an especially welcome outcome for Confederate veterans and Southern white leaders who considered biracial labor alliances a serious threat to white supremacist hegemony. When the union eventually refused to commit any of its bands, the UCV hired amateur non-union bands from across the South—which must have been a unique insult to New Orleans’ highly regarded and nationally influential brass bands, which were sought out for functions from Mobile, Alabama, to Jacksonville, Florida (Sayles 1959). However, upon learning of the UCV’s decision, union musicians held ranks, and their representatives played hardball by appealing to the Central Trades and Labor Council, demanding the UCV be placed on the infamous ‘unfair to labor list’ (Johnson 2015, 329). This did not come to pass, but had their motion been successful, all unionized labor of the entire city would have been barred from doing business with the Confederate reunion. The fact that this was even a possibility points to the power of interracial

5 This history is recounted in detail in a forthcoming book by the author, Brassroots Democracy: Maroon Ecologies and the Jazz Commons (Wesleyan University Press), especially chapter 5.
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organized labor (and organized music) well into the Jim Crow era. For this reason, some historians have suggested that the Black labor movement became the primary vehicle with which to advance Black independence in this period (Arnesen 1991; Rosenberg 1988).

The Trade Councils ultimately did not make a decision because ‘of the sentiment [that] surrounds the Confederate Veterans’ (*Baltimore Sun*, April 13, 1903; Johnson 2015, 330). But one potentially sympathetic member organization would have been the Dockworkers’ Council, which included the LPUBA. This powerful biracial organization made democratic decisions on behalf of all dockworkers and had a ‘50/50’ white-Black labor ratio on the docks and council representation written into its charter. The Trades Council therefore bore the imprint of several powerful unions that had developed mechanisms for working across the color line. Of these, the dockworkers’ unions in New Orleans soon became ‘strong enough and sufficiently cohesive’ to wage and win ‘a mammoth general strike’ of both white and Black workers in 1907 (Rosenberg 1988, 10). Historians have presented the general strike of 1907 as pivotal; David Montgomery has called it ‘the most massive struggle of the period’ in the entire South, and ‘one of the most stirring manifestations of labor solidarity’ in American history writ large (Montgomery 1979, 83). Philip Foner has pointed out how in the strike, working-class ‘Black-white unity [was] explicitly and decisively asserted’ (Foner 1947, 253), although this unity fractured not long after.

How did musicians contribute to this zeitgeist? As Paul Gilroy has suggested, Black musicians represented a ‘priestly caste of organic intellectuals’ for precisely their ability to transmit a ‘distinct and embattled cultural sensibility which has also operated as a political and philosophical resource’ (Gilroy 1993, 76). The collective cultural labor of these organic intellectuals produced new temporalities which contested the imposition of capitalist time-cycles on the New Orleans docks. They were one source of what Clyde Woods calls ‘the blues epistemology,’ the product of a social-cultural process by which the African American working class ‘constructed their vision of a non-oppressive society...[creating] an intellectual and social space in which they could discuss, plan, and organize this new world. The blues are the cries of a new society being born’ (Woods 1998, 39). In this, musicians and organizers’ goals were linked, articulating similar responses in different semiotic and affective registers. As Black screwmen union president A.J. Ellis noted in his negotiations with a white supremacist Louisiana senator, ‘our job [as organizers] is fight for the highest possible wages for the lowest possible amount of work’ (Ameringer 1940, 65), explaining Black dockworkers’ intent to decrease productivity in favor of the bodily well-being of their community. This struggle over time and temporality was heard in the work songs that pianist Jelly Roll Morton sang as he worked as a roustabout, a job which he considered akin to slavery (Williams 1967, 44). As Devonya Natasha Havis explains, the African American “work song” transforms time and launches a critique of work as labor, and Black musicians echoed the resistance of longshoremen to the ‘accelerate’
Brassroots democracy—its distinct manner of sounding, listening, and gathering—was constructed within this labor movement which was a force to be reckoned with. Black communities reclaimed their bodies and the meaning of their affective labor in the context of unions. In the Labor Day parades organized by the LPUBA, the very technical foundations of musicians’ playing, the material reality of embouchures, finger and diaphragm strength, and unique extended techniques were trained and finessed in dialogue with one another and their dancing and marching co-participants. Louis Armstrong recalled that Freddie Keppard would cover his fingers with a handkerchief as he played cornet to protect his ideas from theft during these ceremonies of working-class solidarity, a gesture that Armstrong derided as ‘silly’ (Armstrong 1986, 53). Yet Keppard’s very withholding of information in this way suggests that the ‘borrowing’ of techniques and ideas was a widespread practice in labor-related cultural activity, and the refusal to participate was considered a breach of a social contract. Bodies were rearticulated through each interaction within the Labor Day parade, as musicians’ mutual expertise became a commons in the service of a community in struggle. Friedlind Riedel asks us to ‘consider musical affect’ not ‘in relation to personalized ears and individualized bodies, but to ask about the “cultural techniques” by which music and sound are (made) environmental and through which they modulate spaces, collectives, situations and relations’ (Riedel 2021, 4). Brass bands with links to organized labor became mobile schools, where a kind of collective practicing meant that techniques could pass hands, mouths, and ears. These moments of collective learning and knowledge transfer were another expression of a deep-rooted culture of solidarity. They left what Deleuze identifies as ‘traces of another body on my body,’ a relation of affect by which physicalities, aesthetics, and reciprocal activity increased the capacity for each to act in concert (Deleuze 1978, 4–5). Louis Armstrong internalized and practiced techniques developed by other musicians in the context of Labor Day parades which celebrated Black labor, deepening the social contract between the LPUBA and the wider Black community for which it struggled.

Affective consensus, then, was constructed through the repertoire of playing techniques as well as the co-produced physicalities of worker-musicians, as the New Orleans Black proletariat reappropriated its own body through kinesthetic movement adorned in jubilant sound. Nonetheless, there were limits to this alchemy of bodies and sensorial expression. The respite and solidarity offered by music and movement during Labor Day parades could not fully erase the systemic injustices and traumas of racial capitalism (Jones 2015). Buddy Bolden’s last job before he was committed to a psychiatric institution was marching in a Black Labor Day parade (Marquis 2005, 115–116). Yet affective consensus, inscribed in the very bodies of musicians and their marching public, was constituted through, outside, and in opposition to the systems that dehumanized Black workers and musicians. Black Labor Day musicking expressed how human beings can produce
themselves—their senses, their aesthetics, and their identities—through collective cultural labor, even within conditions not of their own choosing (Marx 1913 [1852], 26).

Conclusion

The contributions of labor organizers to Black New Orleans far exceeded the workplace. Dockworker unions were a bulwark against the fascistic creep of white supremacy in the everyday life of the city, transposing Black musical cultures into forms that could challenge the repression of the state and white capital. Its members’ poll taxes contributed funds to schools, Black churches, and medical institutions (Arnesen 1991, 189). They maintained a legitimacy, even among the white conservative press, unavailable to the saloons and brothers in Storyville (Landau 2013). They had a power that mayors and industry owners were forced to recognize. They brought racist senators to the negotiating table even when it threatened their ‘honor’ as white men. Black dockworkers’ unions were aware of their unique power, and they mobilized this power to provide safe spaces for different forms of Black working-class culture. Musicians, both instrumentalists and vocalists, discovered that affective consensus was a powerful resource for aligning their own members and allies across different sectors. Brassroots formations profoundly affected musicians and contributed to the militant zeitgeist. They help explain why Willie Parker would say, so matter-of-factly, that scabs should be killed for defying labor solidarity on the docks. They also contextualize the observations of German socialist Oscar Ameringer. When he heard Black union members singing, he concluded that ‘[l]eir unionism was far more than a matter of hours and wages. It was a religion’ (Ameringer 1940, 199).

In the present day, Black dockworker activism also helps us think through the stakes and claims of the affective turn. Their movement offers a pathway to conceptualize the affect and the insights of its theoretical innovators that takes the body seriously as a site of knowledge and struggle, without locating pre-conscious bodily sensation as the primary site of political possibility (Rutherford 2016, 286). Especially given the long history of representing Blackness as devoid of intellectual capacity and philosophical insight, such a reductive rendering of human agency seems particularly problematic and inapplicable. What the Black dockworkers’ union and the brassroots movements they generated (and which generated them) make evident is that both affect and epistemology developed through a unified praxis of expression, reflection, and bodily-social interaction—not unlike musical improvisation itself within the jazz tradition. This embodied phenomenology was produced by a strategic empathy that was also religious and spiritual, orbiting spheres of cultural action whose union contested the antiblack antinomies of capitalist modernity and its commodifying, atomizing logic which

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6 Storyville refers to New Orleans’s red-light district, active from 1897 to 1917, where a substantial number of early jazz musicians worked. It was named after the city official, Sidney Story, who sponsored the bill that effectively legalized sex work in this district.
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reduced bodies and time to inputs of profit. Indeed, Black workers and their philosophical interventions through communal music making and sensorial shaping resisted the very mind/body division fundamental to Cartesian thought which continues to pervade modernity’s interpolation of the subject.

New Orleans Black waterfront unions innovated a breakthrough in the history of modern political organizing by expanding of the tradition of affective consensus. They show us what a labor union could be, what a labor movement in the United States with independent Black leadership looked like, felt like, and sounded like—its very affect a model of democratic process achieved through struggle and the solidarity struggle can produce. Like other Black Atlantic institutions, Black unions were vehicles by which affective solidarities were hashed out through experimentation, vulnerability, and dialogue. Uniquely situated in the vicissitudes of racialized labor and capital, these unions created spaces where the music could flourish and take on new meanings, embody new temporalities, and create new physicalities within the context of a cooperative culture which insisted on the possibility of other worlds. Brassroots democracy is the name of dynamic cipher of affect and epistemology, by which participatory decision making fused with euphoric and cathartic collective musicking that challenged the racialized ontologies of capital. It is a struggle that continues to the present day.

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