

All that Jazz

Swayed by its foot-tapping
rhythms, CHARUKESI RAMADURAI
learns why there ain't no city
like New Orleans



A STREET JAZZ STATUE AT
LOUIS ARMSTRONG PARK

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

ON MY RECENT trip to the US, I headed out to New Orleans, hoping to discover the soul of American jazz music. But in that friendly, muggy little town by the Mississippi, I found that the stories went way beyond the music: To freedom, voodoo, gumbo and Tennessee Williams, among other things.

Every corner of this town known affectionately as the "Big Easy" had a colourful story — sometimes hidden, but mostly out in the open for all to enjoy. In fact, after just four days in the city, I was convinced that every day was Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

It was still early in the evening when I went for a stroll on Bourbon Street and there was already a carnival vibe going on. A man on stilts wearing a balloon-like costume waved at passers-by; a quartet was belting out peppy rhythms on a street corner; people were walking with giant cocktail glasses in their hands; a panhandler disarmingly asking for a dollar for his next beer.

It was impossible not to be drawn into this spectacle, just as it was impossible not to stare at some of the more, um, interesting oddballs out there. But here is the thing — nobody cared. Every time someone caught my eye, they smiled, waved or even winked, as if they had known me all their lives. I came to realise soon that New Orleans embraced everyone this way in its comforting warmth, no small wonder given its location in the conservative south of the country.

Caught up in the mood, my friend and I entered a pub advertising giant hand grenades, which turned out to be a potent cocktail involving several types of liquor known and unknown to mankind, in a rather garish green colour. Such a cocktail was really



A JAZZ SINGER BELTING OUT TUNES AT THE SPOTTED CAT

something of a travesty, given that New Orleans is the birthplace of much more sophisticated ones such as the Sazerac.

This potent whisky or cognac cocktail played a starring role in the "Cocktail Walk" I took another evening with a septuagenarian who looked like he could drink all of us clean under the bar. It was on this tour that I learned, among other things, that the very word "cocktail" might owe its existence to New Orleans.

In the 1830s, a French apothecary Antoine Peychaud mixed in some cognac, absinthe, water sugar and his patented Peychaud's bitters in an egg cup ("coquetier" in French). Voila! The world had a new delicious mixed drink and a new word to describe such drinks.

Another morning, I was back at the French Quarter (Vieux Carre),

the throbbing heart of the city, near Jackson Square. This neighbourhood was established by the French in the early 18th century, laid out in neat grids on an elevation away from the river. The area was soon taken over by the Spanish, who left their imprint in the form of beautiful buildings, with their overhanging balconies and classic wrought iron balustrades.

This cosy neighbourhood turned into a buzzing hub for artists and musicians with the arrival of jazz in the early 20th century, along with furious bootlegging during the prohibition era. Over the next few decades, literary geniuses such as Tennessee Williams, W Somerset Maugham and William Faulkner also found themselves at home here, also paying homage to it in their works.

Jackson Square was bustling that morning as usual. A bunch of artists had displayed their work on the railings of the park in the middle, even as some of them sat sketching and painting local scenes. Caricature artists were in demand, with their charcoals and clever ways of making the best of their customer's facial foibles. A busker stood on his own soapbox,

performing tricks to a delighted group of school children out on a day excursion with their harried teachers.

On another side of the park, tarot card readers and assorted astrologers who had set up shop on tiny stools and tables, sat patiently waiting for someone to show interest. I was a bit surprised at their lack of clientele, given New Orleans' penchant for all things mystic and occult.

Rows of shops selling voodoo stuff — from heady incense cones to wooden dolls that appeared straight out of horror films — lined the main road in front of Jackson Square, while the New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum beckoned to me alluringly, with its promise of glimpses into the life of 19th-century voodoo queen Marie Laveau.

It was when I spotted this local



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: THE BOISTEROUS SCENE AT A MARDI GRAS CELEBRATION; A MAN DRESSED UP IN COSTUME AT BOURBON STREET; HORSE BUGGIES IN FRONT OF ST LOUIS CATHEDRAL AT JACKSON SQUARE



free — was aligned to jazz music. Later that night, with this music still ringing in my ears, I wound up at Frenchman Street, known for its music clubs and jazz bars. The Spotted Cat, which came strongly recommended, was silent and empty, between sets.

In sheer contrast, the other popular ones were filled to the brim with locals and visitors eager for their share of the music. And so we walked on, with the plan to enter any club that sounded promising and had a couple of bar stools to spare. After all, a local had assured us: "You can never go wrong on Frenchman Street." Sure enough, the music at the jazz bar we finally settled into (not found on any "best of New Orleans" list) was still superlative.

As we spilled out of the bar into the cool summer night, the music followed us all the way to the end of the street. And for a long time to come, bluesman Earl King's voice echoed in my ears, belting out his ode to this charming city: "I can hear music in the air. Somewhere out there. An I can hear happy voices. Out-a in the air." ■

landmark that I fell a little more in love with this city that celebrates the bizarre along with the ordinary. Or perhaps, it may be that what is weird to the outside world is normal in New Orleans. I would never know.

Punctuating all this colour and chaos was the sound of jazz emanating from every corner. There were multiple brass bands enthralling their audiences with foot-tapping music, some of the musicians themselves joining in impromptu jigs with their listeners. And every one of them, to my

untrained ears, sounded like they had been born to this music.

That is actually true, since music, especially jazz, is in the air in New Orleans, perhaps running in the blood of locals. Which other city pays homage to its most famous musician by naming its international airport after him? Louis Armstrong was born and raised in this city, building upon the remarkable music of others before him including Buddy Bolden and the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. And there is no denying the influence of his hometown on Armstrong's life and music.

As I listened to the swirl and beat of the music around me, I could only think of how the spirit of New Orleans itself — spontaneous, fun and