



# Subversive Sounds: Race and the Birth of Jazz in New Orleans

By Charles B. Hersch

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**Subversive Sounds: Race and the Birth of Jazz in New Orleans** By Charles B. Hersch

*Subversive Sounds* probes New Orleans's history, uncovering a web of racial interconnections and animosities that was instrumental to the creation of a vital American art form—jazz. Drawing on oral histories, police reports, newspaper accounts, and vintage recordings, Charles Hersch brings to vivid life the neighborhoods and nightspots where jazz was born.

This volume shows how musicians such as Jelly Roll Morton, Nick La Rocca, and Louis Armstrong negotiated New Orleans's complex racial rules to pursue their craft and how, in order to widen their audiences, they became fluent in a variety of musical traditions from diverse ethnic sources. These encounters with other music and races subverted their own racial identities and changed the way they played—a musical miscegenation that, in the shadow of Jim Crow, undermined the pursuit of racial purity and indelibly transformed American culture.

“More than timely . . . Hersch orchestrates voices of musicians on both sides of the racial divide in underscoring how porous the music made the boundaries of race and class.”—*New Orleans Times-Picayune*

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## **Subversive Sounds: Race and the Birth of Jazz in New Orleans** By Charles B. Hersch Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #2112011 in Books
- Published on: 2009-03-15
- Released on: 2008-03-15
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .80" w x 6.00" l, .90 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 304 pages

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## **Editorial Review**

### Review

"This is a fresh and original analysis of the context of the birth of jazz. In addition to offering a new and intellectually stimulating interpretation of the role of race, politics, and social class in the music's origins, Hersch is the first in over a generation to delve deeply into the racial aspects of the lives and work of the earliest jazz musicians in New Orleans."

(William Howland Kenney, author of *Jazz on the River* 2007-03-05)

"*Subversive Sounds* underscores the importance of thinking in subtle, complex, and nuanced ways about the relationship between jazz and race. Engagingly written and cleverly framed, Hersch's work displays ample skill and vision while showing us how profoundly race mattered in early New Orleans jazz. This valuable and important book belongs on the top shelf of new jazz studies."

(John Gennari, author of *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* 2007-10-09)

"*Subversive Sounds* is as thoroughly researched as it is groundbreaking. In his study of New Orleans jazz, Charles Hersch is scrupulously sensitive to the music, but he has also surveyed the birthplace of jazz with the keen eye of a social historian. I was especially impressed by his willingness to consider the role of white players—as well as black and Creole musicians—in the racial politics of early jazz."

(Krin Gabbard, author of *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and American Cinema*)

"A provocative new history. . . . Hersch illuminates how musicians of color drew from realities that few white people experienced in forging a form of dance music for people of both races. In that sense, *Subversive Sounds* is more than timely. . . . Tapping oral histories from the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane, Hersch orchestrates voices of musicians on both sides of the racial divide in underscoring how porous the music made the boundaries of race and class. He writes, too, with an edgy sense of how music functioned."

(Jason Berry *Times-Picayune*)

"An important contribution to the social history of New Orleans and jazz."

(*Choice*)

"This well-documented history contributes to the dialog on the role of race in the origins of jazz."

(*Library Journal*)

"[Hersch's] argument is convincing, his writing engaging, and his musical analyses compelling and seductive."

(*Perspectives on Politics*)

"A novel discussion of a surprisingly neglected issue, whose suggestions are well worth pondering."

(Andy Hamilton *The Wire*)

"Hersch has the grasp of time and place that is the hallmark of all the most worthwhile historians. He has brought that to bear effectively here, and the results are illuminating for anyone wanting to understand how

this music called jazz came to be."

(Nic Jones *All about Jazz*)

"Exhaustive research informs [the author's] tightly orchestrated analysis of musical performances and deft portraits of individual musicians, which stand out amid the richly textured descriptions of New Orleans life."

(Iain Anderson *American Historical Review*)

About the Author

**Charles Hersch** is professor of political science at Cleveland State University and the author of *Democratic Artworks: Politics and the Arts from Trilling to Dylan*.

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