

American Gumbo: New Orleans to the Missouri River

She was a bald African American woman about 4 feet 10 inches tall, maybe sixty years old. She wore a red chiffon top, low cut, with a matching skirt. The machine she drove down Bourbon Street was an elaborate tricycle with a boom box playing high decibel rhythm and blues. Huge letters on the side of the contraption spelled out: "Judge not that you be not judged." Periodically she would stop the vehicle and dance – rhythmically, fulsomely – from person to person, curb to curb.

The bars and restaurants go on for blocks. Hawkers motion for you to come in to this or that bar. You recoil because it feels like a carnival and you don't want to get suckered. Then you hear a gorgeous live rendition of *I'm Still in Love with You* coming from inside a bar. You are about to enter, but from across the street you hear a jazz band whose pitch-perfect vocalist is rendering *It's a Wonderful World* so poignantly you want to weep. You continue walking and you hear old time jazz, blues, smooth jazz, rock and roll, and zydeco and you are amazed not just because of the variety of music but because it's all free and it's all being performed by fabulous musicians. You cannot possibly hear it all, but it doesn't matter because it's all connected, and you feel the blues in the jazz and the bebop in the Motown.

A black police officer smoked a big cigar and rode a motorcycle next to a low-riding white cop. They smiled and joked with each other and people on the street. In the corner, a huge woman kissed a diminutive, balding man. A greying woman grew tired of trying to persuade her reluctant husband to dance, so she took to the dance floor with several other women who were decades younger. Everyone's toes were tapping, everyone was swaying, even the reluctant husband. Old people, young people, Europeans, drunks, cross-dressers, hustlers, musicians, hookers, servers, T-shirt entrepreneurs, street performers, tattoo artists, blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, and a couple of sort of, but not really, hip guys from Spokane and Port Townsend mingled and gawked and commiserated. The whole scene somehow worked in a way that did not feel awkward or unsafe. This was the human gumbo for which New Orleans is known, a stew of tourists and locals whose descendants immigrated voluntarily -- or not -- from Africa, Spain, and France – seasoned with Scots-Irish, Italians, Asians, and Native Americans -- a mishmash of humanity that formed the Creole and Cajun cultures and contributed to the food, music, and mood that makes New Orleans so different and easy.

I dropped off Ben at the Louis Armstrong International Airport in New Orleans and for the next few days Vamper, and I rolled north through Shreveport, Louisiana, Texarkana, Arkansas, Paris, Texas (which was not the location of the film of the same name), McAlister and Tulsa, Oklahoma, and up Highway 75 into Kansas – Independence, Altoona, Topeka – and on to Omaha, Nebraska and the Omaha and Winnebago Indian Reservations until we encamped in the state park on the Missouri River outside the tiny town of Ponca near one of the sites where the Corps of Discovery camped shortly after leaving the Mississippi at St. Charles, Missouri.

We finally, blessedly, had left the humidity of the South and there was a cool, dry wind that swept through the rolling hills of Eastern Nebraska, hills that were thick with expectant corn and soybean fields as far as the eye could see.