



# The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square

*Ned Sublette*

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**The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square** Ned Sublette  
Named one of the Top 10 Books of 2008 by *The Times-Picayune*.

**Winner of the 2009 Humanities Book of the Year award from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities.**

**Awarded the New Orleans Gulf South Booksellers Association Book of the Year Award for 2008.**

New Orleans is the most elusive of American cities. The product of the centuries-long struggle among three mighty empires--France, Spain, and England--and among their respective American colonies and enslaved African peoples, it has always seemed like a foreign port to most Americans, baffled as they are by its complex cultural inheritance.

*The World That Made New Orleans* offers a new perspective on this insufficiently understood city by telling the remarkable story of New Orleans's first century--a tale of imperial war, religious conflict, the search for treasure, the spread of slavery, the Cuban connection, the cruel aristocracy of sugar, and the very different revolutions that created the United States and Haiti. It demonstrates that New Orleans already had its own distinct personality at the time of Louisiana's statehood in 1812. By then, important roots of American music were firmly planted in its urban swamp--especially in the dances at Congo Square, where enslaved Africans and African Americans appeared en masse on Sundays to, as an 1819 visitor to the city put it, "rock the city."

This book is a logical continuation of Ned Sublette's previous volume, *Cuba and Its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo*, which was highly praised for its synthesis of musical, cultural, and political history. Just as that book has become a standard resource on Cuba, so too will *The World That Made New Orleans* long remain essential for understanding the beautiful and tragic story of this most American of cities.

## **The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square Details**

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Author : Ned Sublette

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# **From Reader Review The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square for online ebook**

## **Suvi says**

Abandoned for now because quite honestly, it bored me. It was hard to stay focused when the author's thoughts were scattered all over the place. A detailed description about the birth of New Orleans could have been awesome in theory, but in practice Sublette didn't make it work. I've been dreaming about going there and expect it to be very vibrant and filled with interesting people and stories, but in this the confusing minute details about irrelevant things annoyed me. Especially when it felt like pointless rambling compared to other non-fiction I've been reading lately.

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## **Billy says**

This was a pretty cool book. Very eclectic. Basically, it's a history of New Orleans from its earliest days as a Spanish possession up through the Louisiana Purchase, ending in 1819.

The basic thesis of the book is that the three distinct colonial powers that held New Orleans brought different slave cultures to the city - different both in the origins of the slaves, and in the few "freedoms" that slaves were allowed. The author is both a musician and a musicologist, so a huge focus is on the different musical contributions of different groups.

I read a review of the book that compared reading it to having a conversation with a very erudite guy in a bar. Sublette is all over the place, but he really seems to know his stuff (with some exceptions). It's a real good free ranging conversation on New Orleans.

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## **Lyn says**

I usually like historical books that are based on contemporary documents from the period of the book. This book focused on the slave trade and how it affected NOLA's formation and growth. Fair enough. But this book bored me when it went off on tangents about Cuba and Domingue and what not. I understand what he was trying to do - give the reader a bigger picture of what was going on in the world at the time and how it affected NOLA. It just wasn't that interesting to me. I would have liked more info on what was happening in NOLA during the time - he only briefly talks about the urban planning of the city.

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## **patty says**

FIN - Perfect read prior to annual NOLA visit to see friends and family. Well-researched, and now I better understand our centuries-long connections to Africa and the Caribbean, and the music and traditions these connections spawned. My ancestors - from the French (Bredy) , Spanish (Migues) , and German (Dugas) sides all owned slaves likely because they were planters. There is amazing amount of detail online re the

Afro-Louisiana connection. Interesting that the mix of slaves owned by my ancestors represented the three main lineages of African culture that drives much of the information in this book. Though sad to admit, yes my ancestors owned slaves!

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### **Emily says**

way more riveting than its subtitle makes it seem like it's got any business being.

Ned Sublette is a scholar of Cuban music, primarily, and was given a year's fellowship in NOLA (the year before Katrina hit, actually) to study history, culture and music there - including its links to Cuba and present-day Haiti. One thing I loved about this book was never being quite sure what its 'thesis' was, much less its discipline: whether it was straight-up history (with a focus on politics, slavery, etc.), musical theory, cultural studies, race relations, economics ... it's all over the place. But it's wide, curious about the city and its people, and he comes across as excited to share what he learned. Not a sit-back-and-be-dispassionate book whatsoever. It's not that kind of a place, after all.

Barely tipped the iceberg of the history of slavery in the Caribbean and Americas, but still fed me some mini-bombshells I'd never noticed (or absorbed) in other educations. (e.g. Abe Lincoln wasn't the only abolitionist whose vision of freeing slaves culminated with the entire freed slave population being shipped away to places like Liberia and Haiti.)

Made me hear music sometimes, and marvel at the impossibility of hearing it at others: we can never know what the Sunday sessions at Congo Square in the 18th and 19th centuries actually sounded like. Not even by logging in to Spotify or Pandora. Talk about bombshell. This world that made us has been going on a long time, and the constant connections feeding it are infinite. I liked the impossibility of trying to glimpse those moments.

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### **RedSteve says**

This was very good. It made a lot of interesting connections between New Orleans and Havana that many other writers ignore. It also a good bit of the evolution of the city's music and dance. The book largely deals with the period from the founding of the Louisiana Colony through the early 19th Century, but also hits some points up through post-Katrina, including an interesting section on the Indians (Mardi Gras Indians, not Native Americans). The author is maybe a bit heavy on the breast beating about slavery - I find it annoying when an author is writing about slavery and has to stop every few lines to state that it is bad. Seriously, if someone isn't horrified by the unvarnished details of the slave trade, telling them that slavery is immoral isn't going to help. But overall, an excellent book.

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### **Alex Telander says**

Ned Sublette, author of *Cuba and Its Music*, embarks on a daring undertaking in a detailed and complete history of the Big Easy. Sublette spent the 2004-2005 year in New Orleans, leaving just three months before Hurricane Katrina hit and the levees broke, changing the city forever; making this book all the more meaningful and emotional.

With extensive research, Sublette starts at the very beginning, explaining the topography and geology of the Mississippi River and the substantial yet flooded Mississippi Delta, and how there was simply nothing that could really be built there before the advent of water pumps created the potential for draining of the area. In a time when the land that would one day be Louisiana was being fought over and used by the Spanish, French, and British, while every piece of natural resource in this part of the world was being used for the benefit of the Western World, coupled with the unceasing influx of slaves, a group of settlers began a town that would one day become the great city of New Orleans. Inhabitants included an influx of forced citizens from France consisting of prostitutes and convicts.

From its genesis, New Orleans was composed of an entire world of nationalities, cultures, faiths, and languages. Like the spine of the book, Sublette uses music as the backbone of *The World That Made New Orleans*, discussing the influences and developments of these different people, many of them slaves. It is a city that, after the catastrophic events of Hurricane Katrina, will never be the same – like New York missing the World Trade Center skyline. Thankfully, Sublette does an incredible job of revealing the many chapters in the history of New Orleans.

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### **Wes Freeman says**

Author's *Cuba and Its Music* is pretty near my favorite book, so I'll prolly just stay disappointed by anything I read by him until he writes the sequel to it. Hand now tipped, I'll say book does exactly what it says it will in the title, which is to say it bangs together a pretty good portrait of the colonial and slavery-besotted petri dish in which New Orleans congealed. Swap *Cuba* for *New Orleans* and that's kinda what author's rookie-book was about as well, but believe me when I tell you, you ain't half ready for what's going on between those covers. Author brings the mostest science to bear on that mess, and tromps through 400 years of Antillean history leaving no stone unturned. Plenty untouched stones in this here (although southern Louisiana, as author explains, actually has no stones in it -- fun fact) and where *Cuba and Its Music* felt like a panorama, *World That Made* feels like a diorama. There's plenty of NOLA history and author makes strong case for the lasting affects of the city's time as a Spanish colony. Author chases up some hot leads, but they either don't pan out or he doesn't slow down enough to illuminate what he's found. When he does dig his heels in, it's for a multi-chapter exegesis on the mundane evils of slavery, which is hell of effective, but doesn't contain a lot of surprises and became a chore after awhile. Whatever. Author said there would be music in there. There wasn't enough for me. I love this guy and this review is already soggy with sour grape juice, so I'm out. He wrote this book in tandem with a memoir of the year he spent in New Orleans right before Katrina hit and I'm just gonna shut up and go read that book.

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### **Monica says**

I wish I was in NY. Maybe some of you New Yorkers can check this out. Ned is having a book party and forum in the city Thursday night. I'll type the info. I wish I could figure out how to send an attachment. BOOK PARTY "hip, erudite and provocative story-telling"- Roger Han, 'Songlines' "an energetic and fascinating read" --Tristram Lozaw, 'Boston Globe' NED SUBLETTE speaking singing, signing books MAY 8 7:30 pm BRECHT FORUM NYC 451 West Street (Bank & Bethune)

previously posted:

got this on line <http://www.boston.com/ae/books/article...>

MMc review Feb 2010

Timing was right for me and this book: *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and a trip west are fresh in my memory...Haiti suffered a dramatic disaster...I just watched some flics on the War of 1812 and have been listening to the 'Who Dat Nation' playlist, and, for the first time in 46 years, the Saints won the Super Bowl.

You'll be amazed at the huge importance little ol' Haiti and Cuba had in our nation's history. Mr. Sublette thoroughly lays out the complex development of the slave trade and conflagration of Spanish, French and British enterprise in America.

His research is impeccable and colorful; his scholarship erudite yet very accessible, punctuated with humor and some difficult observations of our not so perfect country.

I won't spoil the historical explanation of Aaron Neville's vocal styling, tri-color dances, voodoo ceremonies, the derivation of mardi gras, the large population of free women of color, why black men dress up and march as Indians, the origin of Dr. John's moniker or who taught Notorious B.I.G....you'll enjoy learning this, and so many other things, yourself.

What a fabulous book. I wanted to come back to it at every free moment. I come away knowing so much more than I did when I first cracked it open. He makes his work look so easy. I am forever grateful.

As *Cuba and It's Music* is about *much* more than Cuban music, *The World That Made New Orleans* is about *MUCH* more than New Orleans. *I recommend it to every American, of every ethnicity, to truly learn about their country.*

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## Kate says

Even though I've gone to New Orleans several times, I know very little about its history. So I picked this book up a few weeks before a trip to New Orleans. I was mostly hooked when I started, the history itself is pretty interesting and Sublette's passion really shines through. But, I did not finish it prior to my trip, and I really struggled to finish it when I got back... it's been sitting here for almost 2 months waiting to get through the final pages. Parts are very interesting and a very quick read, and other parts are really really really dry. For me, it's really difficult to read about music, which the author spends a lot of time doing. I just can't hear it unless I'm listening to it, so those parts were really difficult to get through.

Also, I was looking for more actual history of NOLA. The histories of Cuba and Saint-Domingue, and the effects of slavery in other parts of the country were interesting, but not exactly what I was looking for. But, I still enjoyed this book, for the most part.

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## **Sheila says**

I actually was crying when I finished this book. My daughter and I went to New Orleans recently to visit Tulane, where she'd been accepted to college, in order to see if a San Franciscan could be comfortable in the south. We were fortunate enough to have a week to drive around a bit - saw Lafayette, Houma, Grand Isle and the spaces in between. She might not have been comfortable there, but New Orleans ... I stopped by the Faulkner book store the first day and bought *Zeitoun*, which I read in a few days while in New Orleans and this book, which I opened back home. The book is exquisitely, passionately written - the chapters on the economics of slavery are the best I have read on the subject. The final chapter that provoked the tears was on the Mardi Gras Indians, whom I had never heard of, but who embody the resistance and cultural richness of their African slave ancestors. My daughter decided that the weather in Santa Barbara suited her better (and it's closer to Mom : ), so I will have to make excuses to return to New Orleans, but that won't be difficult.

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## **Nan says**

Great scholarship and a personable voice. Sublette takes on the formidable task of walking through the multiple layers of this fascinating city from the bottom up. A major accomplishment is to place in context the journeys that brought Africans not just to New Orleans but to Haiti and Cuba; understanding all 3 is essential to getting a handle on the complexity of both jazz and the city itself.

Sublette is particularly good at outlining the horrors of slavery, and the ways in which slave-owners used their power to shape American politics. Thomas Jefferson doesn't fare very well (hard to disagree if you've read "Notes on the State of Virginia"). In fact, there's as much information in the book about that as there is about New Orleans. All in all, extremely informative and well-written history.

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## **Jen says**

This book is packed with information. And I liked it, but think I (or any reader) would have benefitted more if I had read the author's previous book, 'Cuba and Its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo' in advance -- Much of New Orleans character stems of course from its musical history -- which is derived from the confluences of the slave trade, the history of the various Caribbean colonies and which state (nation) had control over New Orleans and when. New Orleans history is tied much with the history of Saint Dominique(now Haiti/the DR), as well as Cuba and is further tied to the interstate slave trade (between Upper South and Deep South) that occurred in the US after the Louisiana Purchase. Therefore, the info was a lot to take in, and difficult to retain, having not been schooled in such before. I would like to read the previous book and then reread this one, (perhaps in conjunction with listening to sound recordings!) to see if the connections are more easily understood as a result.

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## **Stephanie O'Hanlon says**

I was VERY disappointed with this book. I am all about research; I'm a writer, myself, and I usually love doing my research, getting those details just right, not just believable, but right, correct, accurate. But, man,



this book was murder to get through.

It wasn't very interesting, at all. It was like regurgitated data, like a textbook. I love non-fiction, I really do, especially books like these about history, but it really was very boring. I also had a problem with the fact that he kept naming off places and didn't bother to give any maps. Just, something general, something to give you an idea of where everything is located, a general sense of direction so that you can visualize it. But, there were very few pictures in general, and those that were, were so small that I could barely read what it said on them. For instance, he gives an old map of NOLA & there's no date. You can barely read the writing on it, and the pictures are fuzzy. How is that acceptable? Especially for a hardcover edition.

I also had a problem with his use of the word "Indians" when referring to Native Americans. It's a little ignorant to use the defunct term. And, he also liked to talk about things that I think were unnecessary to the general history. It was almost too much information about everything else and too little about New Orleans itself. He also had a problem jumping out of order. He would go in a very good flow with dates in order chronologically, but then add a date in from ten or so years earlier with an important fact. It made making notes a little messy and difficult.

Lastly, he kept referring to his other book, constantly. I mean, once or twice is enough, but upwards of five times? A little much.

Overall, a very boring, disappointing read. If I didn't need it for research, I would have given up a few pages in. I considered giving up once I had reached the Louisiana Purchase (because my novel has settings in the 18th century only), but I didn't want to leave the book unfinished. I had to power through the last fifty pages, and I honestly have never read so fast in my life. I doubt I retained any of the information. Two stars is generous, in my opinion.

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## Simone says

Ok, don't get me wrong. In many places this book is very dry. Mainly it focuses on the colonial history of New Orleans, which is to say he spends a lot of time detailing movements by the French and Spanish royalty. Still New Orleans has a pretty crazy history and it makes for pretty entertaining reading.

It started really dry and then it really picked up, certain parts of this are more engaging than others. Especially noteworthy are the frank passages on slavery. Sublette talks frankly about aspects of slavery that are routinely downplayed in American historical discussions. Moreover, his discussion of the reluctance of historians to acknowledge the probability of the Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings relations.

*"New Orleans was a dissolute town from the beginning. The crooks and whores were unsuited by experience and temperament for artisanship or agriculture, but were well prepared to establish a culture of criminality and poverty."*

*"[The Indians after Katrina] As they tried to rebuild their lives and their community, they sewed their suits in the dark, empty city. You don't go to those lengths for folklore. This was a sacramental act. These were men who had fought all their lives against the amnesia that is slavery's legacy...They played tambourines and sang as they moved through the empty, twisted ghost town of the Lower Ninth Ward, where six months after the disaster the people were still gone and houses sat on top of upside down cars. They refused to cooperate in their own erasure. They were still men, and these were still their streets. They wouldn't bow down. They rocked the city with their Congo dances."*

*This book is good, very good. Highly recommend it to anyone planning a trip to New Orleans.*

*Here's the order you should do it in: Read this book. Watch the first season of Treme, go to New Orleans.*

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