

## **TEN THOUSANDS STEPS**

*By Nick Taylor*

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*Recently popularized by HBO's Treme, dogged by controversies surrounding outbreaks of violence, and politicized by those seeking to redefine the city, New Orleans' Second Line parties have become a symbol of the celebratory defiance of the Crescent City and are occasions every respectful visitor should attempt to experience.*



It's a beautiful mid-April Sunday in New Orleans. In my hometown of Toronto I would perhaps be going to a movie matinee or taking a walk as the city thaws from a long winter. At the moment, however, I am in New Orleans... And in New Orleans Sundays are made for something far more vital. Here Sundays are for dancing in the street. Here they are for community. Here they are for *Second Line*.

What is Second Line? A Second line parade is essentially the best moving block party you'll ever go to... a mass of dancing, revelling neighbours, friends, tourists and onlookers snaking through the backstreets of the city following a brass band and a group of elaborately dressed organizers over the course of an afternoon.

"A lot of people in New Orleans call it a form of meditation and relaxation. For four hours you just kinda get away from your problems, go out into the street and dance and have a good time," I am told by Charles 'Action' Jackson, who hosts the "Takin' it to the Streets" Second line podcast on [WWOZ](http://www.wwoz.org) community radio. "It's what we call 'getting your ten thousand steps.'"

#### LINK TO VIDEO 01:

<https://vimeo.com/84548240/52eca2fdca>

Today's Second line is organized by 'The Old and Nu Style Fellas,' one of the 30-odd Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs that organize the parades. These local community groups were originally founded to provide health insurance and funeral arrangements to their dues-paying members. "I know it started over a hundred years ago. It wasn't as flamboyant as it is today." Jackson explains. "A benevolent society was put together every time someone passed away to help pay for the funeral." These days, the clubs just as often provide football uniforms for the neighborhood boys team or help the elderly collect their groceries.

The yearly anniversary parades, aka "Cinderella days," were historically a way of advertising their organization in order to recruit new members. The clubs spend a year raising money through dinners and raffles to fund the custom outfits they wear and reinvest extra proceeds back into the community. "Some money is given on school supplies, thanksgiving turkeys, Christmas toys for families in need." Jackson says. The music is provided by one (or sometimes several) of the many great brass bands in the city. Today it is the amazing, grammy-nominated [Hot 8 Brass Band](#).

In the working class Treme and mid-City neighbourhoods, the Old and Nu Style Fellas parade navigates a set route, which includes pit-stops where folk can buy food from barbecue grills set up on pickup trucks and cheap, cold beer from local entrepreneurs. At one of these stops, from a local hall, the Old and Nu Style Fellas make their grand entrance. Dressed uniformly in a crisp light blue and lavender motif, the club members peacock their way into the party as onlookers cheer on.

#### LINK TO VIDEO 02:

<https://vimeo.com/84548909/e7eb53ae75>

Like every other aspect of New Orleans life, Second lines were profoundly affected by the Levee breach in 2005. For many years prior Second lines were strictly a neighbourhood phenomenon. They operated without permits and weren't attended by those outside the small community in which the Social Aid club made it's home. As with almost every aspect of New Orleans that changed after the storm and the subsequent exodus from the city by huge populations of these neighbourhoods. "All the Second Line [groups] were displaced and some are *still* displaced... a lot of them tried to get back but couldn't because there was no housing or jobs."

Another blow to Second Line culture has been incidents of violence in or near parades in recent years. Jackson addresses the topic: "It's not really a bad rap, because things *are* bad down here," he says before making the point that "we've had 29 or 33 groups parade for over a hundred years and we might have had five incidents."

In 2006, after two shootings near Second line parades, the New Orleans police began charging upwards of \$5000 to police parades – almost ten times what they had been before. The

parades were also politicized by the real estate developers and their political cronies hellbent on gentrifying and whitewashing the city. Second lines were in danger of becoming extinct.

It took a concerted effort from organizers to keep them alive. They sued the city, which has now lowered fees to more reasonable levels. Social clubs also made an effort to bring back their scattered membership, many of whom have still not returned to New Orleans permanently but will come in on the weekend specifically to keep the Second line tradition alive. They've also made the parades more accessible to the large segment of young, largely white, new residents of New Orleans that started arriving in the city with a hunger for “genuine” New Orleans culture.

All these factors, plus the cultural shot in the arm that HBO's post-Katrina drama *Treme* provided, have led to the Second lines we are seeing today - vibrant, beautiful and inclusive, but still with an air of the desperation and defiance that defines New Orleans in the neighbourhoods that surround the tourist sanctuary of the French Quarter.

LINK TO VIDEO 03:

<https://vimeo.com/84549653/ebc234540a>

Two weeks after the Second line parade we attended, on Mother's Day 2013, a young man approached that weekend's Second line, which had just began, and opened fire into the crowd. Nineteen people were treated for gunshot wounds, three were left in critical condition (all survived.) The event made national news and briefly reignited the debate about street violence and organized community events.

Thankfully, in this case, saner heads prevailed. The chief of police and the mayor separated the shooting incident from the parade. “This didn't have anything to do with second lines, and it didn't have anything to do with the rich cultural heritage of New Orleans,” said Mayor Mitch Landreau in a statement after the incident.

Events like the Mother's Day shooting are a byproduct of a still broken city, one that is reconstituting itself daily while trying to hold on to the traditions that make it the most unique city in America. Second lines are a vital part of this reconstitution.

Despite these setbacks, Jackson, whose grandfather was the snare drummer for the Olympia Brass band, and who has been involved with Second lines since childhood, explains that the tradition of Second lines is only getting stronger. “Second line is definitely not going anywhere. The anticipation is to go at least another hundred years. You can see a 2-year-old baby Second lining. [If] we start 'em off young, train them on how to fix their clothes and act accordingly, the tradition can go on for a very long time.”

END.