

The New Orleans
AVANT-GARDE ©



RAW CREATIVITY

by Phyllis Parun

As an artist, chances are that your art making at home or in school began with raw material or even trash. Perhaps, as is true today in New Orleans charter schools, your teacher carried the expense of providing the books, pencils and paper. Perhaps you came from a family that was on a fixed income, and you cleverly make art out of scrap cloth or paper. Perhaps you wrote phrases on napkins, in the dust or on walls with mud from your yard or sang songs you heard on the radio. Whatever your inspiration, it bubbled up and found media in whatever you had, and that spark was set aflame.

300-year-old New Orleans now thrives as an artist's city. The richness of the environs of old European buildings, chipping paint, weathering wood frame houses, unpainted



Pure improv: Helen Gillet (cello) and James Singleton (bass) at Marigny Opera House in Spring, 2013

facades, moldy stucco and crumpling handmade brick offers inspiration. The flood of 2005 contributed even more fodder for artistic creativity. Found debris are being cleverly used in sculpture, fashion and wall hanging. Raw space, white canvas, empty pages, unspoken words provide a rich playground for the imagination.

As New Orleans finds its rightful place in history as a city rich in all the arts, this environment for creativity is disappearing. The architects of preservation have deserted the buildings. It's no

Paris! Craftspeople who inherited the trades necessary to keep up the houses are disappearing. The integrity of the architecture is threatened by the takeover of modernization. Real Estate agents and sellers are selling to the highest bidders. The building craft of the original free persons of color and slave builders is eroding with the introduction of modernized split-level doubles and hardy board exteriors. The oldest buildings, the Creole Cottages, are morphing into "apartments anywhere USA" as the influx of wealthy absentee landlords buy up properties in Tremé, Marigny and Bywater.

With gentrification, art and creativity are being challenged. When raw space disappears, it falls to visionaries and artists to maintain an environment of creativity and the spirit of art in New Orleans. This issue is about the roots of that spirit. ❖



In 2008, Charmaine Neville received a painting from New Orleans artist Jim Sohr, with Phyllis Parun and Marianne Marx (Alvar Branch Library manager)



St. Roch Market: an exceptional renovation

out of chaos

by holly woodie

out of chaos came words,
 powerful words
 nestled in the form of poetry
 there was a time i did not know what to call
 those incomplete sentences that
 fostered each other freely
 the words just flowed and
 kept me sane
 like the containing constancy of music
 laying the groundwork of a home
 i carry inside
 i learned what it meant to write in traditional forms
 and from there
 i easily broke the mold with intensely visual poetry
 in the form i now call one breath poems
 ever evolving as change is to life
 seeing the world in its minutia
 color and dark
 sound and day break became poetry
 the small things alight
 i let go learning how to live
 through the words
 i live to write



©holly_woodie. holly woodie is a New Orleans native who spent nine years in New York City growing her art. She hosts a weekly women's poetry circle at St. Anna's church, holding a creative space for women poets from 2-4 p.m. on Monday afternoons. She will be published in the **New Laurel Review**. Email fleurdeholly@gmail.com for info on the weekly poetry circle.



LSUNO classroom, 1960

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LSU NEW ORLEANS

by Carolyn Wilenzick Levy

At certain times, certain milieu are raw creativity in and of themselves. LSUNO was one of these.

We were a group of students who hung around a certain table in the cafeteria of Building Three. In those young halcyon days of LSUNO, the buildings were anonymous, not eponymous. They were old military barracks left over from a former naval air base. LSUNO was the most unique and creative university in the country. It was a very creative environment and for us, it was the Left Bank of Paris.

In that primitive cafeteria, we could have been on the set of *South Pacific* or *Mash*. Joe Walker was a regular table talker. So were Leo Surla, Pat Schultze, Henri Schindler, Maggie Dufour, Jim Charbonnet, Alan Rosensweig and "moi."

Joe and Leo were older students with more worldly experience, who were as knowledgeable about the studies, philosophy, liquor and cards as much as any of our young Ph.D. professors. They would hold forth, and we'd sit around as if at the feet of Socrates.

We would adjourn to the Surf, a watering hole on Elysian Fields, and there Bob and Kathy Gibbons, a married couple, both Ph.D.s who taught in the English Department, would join us. Novelists, playwrights, philosophers, adventurers would discuss our misadventures over libations. We could get rowdy at times, but it was just fun. When I think of that



LSUNO Building Three

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clique and how the various personalities have advanced the city of New Orleans, I'm truly amazed. Those were the salad days.

Joe Walker got many politicians elected. Henri Schindler designs the floats for Rex and delights the entire city with his aesthetic excellence, which was already well developed when just a student. He would organize us to see movies he considered "de-rigueur."

It was the best of times. It shaped me. We were young and beautiful and had an esprit de corps, which really was an esprit de coeur (*Fr. spirit of our hearts*).



WHAT INSPIRES MY WRITING by Maggie Collins

Toni Morrison once said that if there is a story out there that hasn't been told, and if you want it told, you should tell it.

I began writing because many of my stories weren't told, and I wanted them told. I wanted to write a book about Creoles. There aren't many Black Creole writers from Louisiana. When I say Creole writers, I am talking about writers who come from Acadiana where French is spoken in the home. There aren't many writers who tell stories from places like Lafayette, New Iberia or Acadiana, basically southwest Louisiana. My father speaks French fluently, so I wanted to tell this story. The original title was The Curse of the Mulatto. It is a folktale that my Uncle Romiere told me and was probably passed down from the slaves. He also told me Bouqui and Lapin stories, which are the Br'er Rabbit tales, and those were also from slaves.

Celestial Blue Skies is about a Creole family that thinks it's cursed. Many, not all but many, people in Louisiana are superstitious, and some believe in ancestral curses.

It is a story about a young girl, Celeste, who's part of a family with its share of dysfunction in a small Louisiana town where everyone knows everybody's business. Celeste was inspired by my first character, Tut. Tut has mental illness and is a free spirit. Initially the protagonist was Tut; however, I was told by editors and others that Tut

would not make a good protagonist because Tut was a horrible mother and not a good person, so I had to develop Celeste. I am glad I did because Celeste's story shows how difficult it can be for a child living with a parent with mental illness.

Celestial Blue Skies is a coming of age story, and many people often ask if this is in any way autobiographical. Celeste is like me in that when I was younger, I loved to read and write. I was poor growing up in a small town in Louisiana. I loved to read and write. Judy Blume was my favorite writer. Maya Angelou was my favorite poet; may she rest in peace. I also liked Nikki Giovanni. My favorite novel is The Color Purple, by Alice Walker. It is written as an epistolary, a book that shows how literacy can empower women. I was raised with very strong women in my life like Celeste, and my grandmother had mental illness, as did others in my family.

However, that's where the similarities stop. I was raised by responsible and loving parents. My mother was nothing like Tut. My father was very much present in my life. He raised ten children while working in the sugarcane mill, all of whom turned out very successful. My family has always been very supportive and loving.



Lee Grue, Carolyn Levy, Maggie Collins

Celestial Blue Skies is about looking to the sky for the strength of our ancestors and within ourselves and those that have come before us. As I have said, I was inspired by my Uncle Romiere Auzenne, who told me stories

I AM MYSELF by Carolyn Levy

I am myself and
I am me and
That's the way
I want to be.
And God Almighty
It took years to
Help me overcome my
Fears of simply being me.
But here I am and here I'll stay
And hope forever everyday.
But if I should
Get off the track
Well then I swear
I'll come right back.
'Cause I am me and
I am me and
That's the way
I want to be. ❖

©1998 Carolyn Levy, New Orleans. Look for Carolyn's soon-to-be-published novel, Regina, to be published by Bill Lavender in 2014.

and folktales. He enjoyed telling me stories about my family and life in the past. More people, especially children, need to talk to their grandparents and great aunts and uncles to learn about their ancestors. Our elders have so much to tell. Those stories are part of who we are. Just as the sky brings us rain and the renewal and continuity of life, our ancestors who are long gone are part of our bloodline, which is in the men and especially the women who help continue our future. We should look to the sky which holds our ancestors, our God and everything that is greater than ourselves. ❖

Author Maggie Collins's future writing projects include Vampire in my Farm Town Utopia, and a sequel to Celestial Blue Skies, entitled The Curse of the Mulatto, which will be Celeste's story as an older woman. Her blog is at <http://celestialblueskies.blogspot.com/> and her books may be ordered at amazon.com. Contact her at maggierrodin@yahoo.com

HOW I BECAME A POET

by Ann Lee Meitzen Grue

It was during World War II. I was living with my two Meitzen aunts, whose husbands were at war. I was nine years old. My mother and father were travelling with an oil crew looking for oil. My aunts had no children, but loved children. I was the one they practiced on before their own came along. All my faults were tolerated. Anything I said or did was considered smart, funny or amazing. There is much to be said for a childhood with great people tending you. Those were the years when children were dropped off with extended family without any thought that you might object.

My aunts, "the girls," as they were called, had rented a small house across from the Chambers County Courthouse where they both worked. It was summer, and I was going to stay and go to school in Anahuac. The girls insisted my Nanny Meitzen leave my grandfather to come to town from the old place to live with us. Her sense of fun and sense of freedom delighted us both. She and I played together. Everything was funny to my grandmother. At least once a day she said, "No fool. No

fun." She had to have a sense of humor to live with my tyrannical grandfather for so many uncomplaining years. My second generation German grandfather, Arthur "Mike" Meitzen, was now left in that big house to rattle around alone. He was short, slightly bowlegged, smoked a big cigar and wore a smashed black hat. A well-known carpenter and contractor, he never repaired or painted his own house. The house teetered on a quickly eroding twelve-foot bluff above brown water. It was years before the house fell in -- it did at last.

The rent house in town had Daddy Long Leg spiders in the bathtub. It was a crooked cottage that sat flat on the ground -- no sills or joists. We had resident insects. A plain house with basic furniture, it had hundreds of books from book clubs.

I slept with my Nanny. My aunts each had their own room. Although Anahuac is said to be the oldest town in Texas, it remains small today. There had once been a Fort

Anahuac located in what became a park. A few bricks remained on the Bay Hill.

I was not born in Texas. I was born in Plaquemine, LA, on the Mississippi River, but I loved Texas. The old place was out in the country. As a country kid, I was allowed to run and roam free but expected to be smart enough to take care of myself. That summer in town, I wandered between the rent house and the courthouse; modern then, it still looks modern today. It was built

I'd always known. From that day on, I read poetry, any poetry I could lay my hands on, and I imitated Poe, poem after poem. I wrote a poem called "The Fisherman By the Sea." After all, we too were by the sea, or what was almost the sea. I had a book on Greek myths. I wrote a poem called The Great God Pan.

My aunts were alert to anything I did that moved me to higher education. As kids, they had walked three miles to school.

Both graduated from the Anahuac High School, but there was little possibility of college. They went right to work in town and bought a car. They wanted the moon for me. After I started writing poetry, my aunts took a trip to Beaumont, Texas, fifty-five miles away, to buy a poetry book for me. That book became my bible. It was a great book. It still is — Louis Untermeyer's "The Treasury of Great Poems." The poems began with the Song of Songs from the Bible. Next came Chaucer, then some old English and Scottish ballads and



Living Treasures Award presentation to Lee Grue in March, 2013. From left: Carolyn Levy, Lee Grue, George Koschel, Phyllis Parun

out of some kind of stone embedded with petrified sea critters. My Aunt Tee worked in the Country Clerk's office. She was not the County Clerk. He was elected, but everyone knew who ran the office. My Aunt Teedie was a piece of work — smart, hot tempered, and fun. Barefooted, I would go into her office to type and erase things with a round pink eraser with a black brush attached. My dog, Guy Cade Jackson, usually went with me.

After we typed for awhile, we would go downstairs where my Aunt Bernie worked for the Rationing Board. In her office, I was allowed to sit in a large steel vault and read; schoolbooks were stored there. It was where I discovered poetry, in particular, the poems of Edgar Allan Poe. My full name is Ann Lee Meitzen. I was called Ann Lee, both names, as they do in the South. Every one in my family called me Ann Lee. Poe's love was Annabel Lee. Close enough for me. His poems were as rhythmic and rhymed as the children's poems of Eugene Fields that

spirituals, went on through Victorian poets both English and American, to what was then, in Copyright 1942, modern poetry. Wonder upon wonders, it even had women poets: Anne, Duchess of Kent, Amy Lowell, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edith Sitwell, Elinor Wylie, fourteen women in all, each poet represented by a brief biography with some consideration of craft. Arthur O'Shaughnessy, "The Singer of One Song," was in my book. I read how he had been saved by his editor, would not have been anthologized if it had not been for his editor, who trimmed his work for that one perfect poem, the one that I could recite by heart.

A part of this miracle was how, with love and care, my aunts managed with scant formal education of their own to find the perfect poetry book to serve my art all my life. I can never thank them enough. I think of them and honor them every time I pick up a pen to write.