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# Treme for Tourists: The Music of the City without the Power

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Henry Butler, the well-known New Orleans piano player, and his music were featured in several second-season *Treme* episodes. Early in the first show, he said it was “good to be home.”

In the real world not long after Katrina, Butler had showed up with thousands of others on the porch of the ACORN<sup>1</sup> building on Elysian Fields Avenue near the corner of St. Claude Street. He had waited his turn. ACORN was one of the few places open and able with crews of workers and volunteers running a home “gutting” program that ended up handling and cleaning out close to 6,000 houses before all was said and done. There was no involvement of FEMA money, city money, federal money, or anything but what people put forward or what ACORN had raised.

Butler got all of this. He didn’t mince words. He wanted ACORN to do the gutting, he knew his place on the list, but he was desperate to get home and be sure that his house was not declared more than 50 percent damaged and, therefore, ineligible for recovery monies from the state Road Home disaster. The real cost of gutting each house down to the studs so it could dry out and be prepped for rebuilding was \$2,500. Butler paid it gladly. The day the work was finished, he came by and gave CDs of his music to all of the ACORN workers and staff in the building. He has been quoted frequently in the press speaking about how much ACORN, the gutting, and the work fighting to rebuild the city meant to him. This will never be a part of the story in the tourist version of *Treme*. I wonder why not, but I’m afraid I know.

Industrial tourism is like believing that the bright coat of paint applied on the outside is the same as the house on the inside, a veneer rather than a real structure. *Treme* takes people where the tourists want to go to see, hear, and eat things that the tourists have come to believe are the same as New Orleans. Tourism is an in-and-out adventure. Regardless of the now famous slogan that “what happens in Vegas, stays in

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Vegas,” the whole point of tourism is to take the experience away with you, rather than leaving it where you visit. Tourism is by definition a fantasy tour, which is why it is so often seen as preferable to regular life. Make no mistake about it, tourism in New Orleans is somewhere between big business and the *only* business in town. According to the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau (2010), the post-Katrina period has been a period of huge investment in industrial tourism, resulting in “300 more restaurants than 2005, new cultural attractions, \$400 million of improvements into local hotels, \$250 million of improvements into the Louisiana Superdome, and \$92.7 million of improvements into the Morial Convention Center. With *Treme*, the tourism boosters got it all for free, no questions asked, no bills paid. Nowhere is this truer in the tourism of *Treme* than its steadfast refusal to deal with the issues and dynamics of power.

I loved David Simon’s *The Wire*, set in Baltimore. I was never confused that it was “real” or some kind of docudrama about Baltimore. It was good drama in an urban setting that was filled with straight talk, bent angles, and people from unions, politics, and crime, that felt multidimensional, complex, and real. ACORN organizers and some other commentators in Baltimore felt slighted by the show because it didn’t depict the part of the world that included community organizing. I got that, but I was a fan. And with all due respect, Baltimore is many, many great things, but it is not a tourist city and in point of fact is increasingly almost an exurban suburb of Washington, D.C.

I’m having a harder time with *Treme*.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad the show is on the air, and I’m delighted to see it set in New Orleans. When they film in front of my house at Fredrick Douglass High School (where Wendell Pierce in the show is an assistant band director) or elsewhere in the Bywater neighborhood where I live, I’m happy to move my truck out of the way. I’m friendly to the caterers, truck drivers, security, and even the special duty cops. I shake hands and give the thumbs up at local bars and restaurants when they are featured as background for the action. On that score it’s all good and thanks, Mr. Simon. When I am flying home, I say the same to all of the doctors and pharmacists who share seats with me on their way to big conventions here. We need the business in New Orleans. Welcome! Bring it on!

With *The Wire* I knew it was all just made up stuff, but I liked the gritty slices of the Baltimore that we knew and were a central part of the action. One of the things that worked in *The Wire* was the nuanced and complex way that Simon, a former police and beat reporter up there, handled the blurry lines between good and bad guys. They were real people. He drew you in. You rooted for some of the guys and against other guys. There is no day in the streets of any city where I wouldn’t want Omar to have my back. Same with the cops. In *The Wire* you knew where you stood with the cops and you cared about some of them and went to the other side of the street when you saw some of the others coming. Both cops and robbers forced you to have to think twice. There were no virgins there. McNulty was a no-boundaries, over-the-line, drunk, pathetic piece of work, and you just had to love him, but you never doubted that the clock was ticking before he totally messed it up.

New Orleans is a violent city, even more so than Baltimore, and in fact when it comes to murder and major crimes, the city is currently setting *historic* records for crime levels (van Landingham 2011). But after two seasons, it is amateurish how *Treme* deals with what today is an intrinsic part of the pattern of the city. Simon doesn't know New Orleans, but in *Treme* he tries to compensate with more "historical" and "contemporary" references to substitute for the real New Orleans, the city he seems to like, but can't quite grip. Even as great as New Orleans music is and as much as I like the exposure given to some of the local players as a stalwart citizen of the hometown, I often have trouble with the one-dimensional minstrel show aspects of all of this, which sometimes are just painful to watch.

One of the main characters is the Indian chief whose struggle and cultural rectitude is supposed to attract some of our sympathy despite the fact that he is invariably a mean, hard, cranky son-of-a-bitch. In the first season, we watched him lay in wait and then beat up a young fellow within an inch of his life, and perhaps farther than that, for having stolen his tools. Yes, a working man's tools are part of his life blood and daily bread, but few working men fail to understand that they are just tools, and it's really the head and hands where the work is done and the money is made. This stalking and brutish mayhem is whack. And, then nothing more on that . . . it was all just left hanging and random. All of that was strictly cowboy, and certainly not about Indians in New Orleans. Who would ever trust this guy to lead a work crew, much less a tribe?

In *Treme* the cops are plastic, tinny, and nothing more than crooks with a badge, save for one desk jockey, who seems largely our hero because he gets along with the sniveling, heart on her sleeve lawyer, who is so committed to the truth that the entire season she could not tell her teenage daughter about her father's suicide. If there was one thing I thought Simon would be able to understand differently than most and in his own way make a badly needed contribution to our city is in looking deeply at the police. I'm not seeing it.

The violence this season offered a grisly rape and general beat down of one of the main characters, a woman barkeep, as she moved to close up at the end of the night. Where was Simon on this story? None of this was real. Watching the "tourist" *Treme*, we're supposed to believe that there is a bar in the hood in our fair city (any fair city?) that doesn't have a shotgun or some kind of firearm behind the counter. We're supposed to believe that our woman bartender wasn't packing heat, mace, and more. We're supposed to believe that there's a woman or man barkeep in the City of New Orleans that blithely packs the day's money in their purse or pocket and stands in the dark outside to lock the door. Maybe all of that happens in Disneyland, some college town, or Toronto, or perhaps even Baltimore, but that's not New Orleans, friend!

I don't want to seem unkind about *Treme*, but the tourism tinge also skews everything about race out of kilter from the real city, and race and class are the heart of everything in this town. New Orleans is a service industry city, where more than 50,000 people were employed in the hospitality industry before the storm. Many of restaurants and bars were unable to open for years because public housing was closed, soaring rents had made affordable housing way out of reach for the largely African

American service workers trying to return to their jobs, and schools were closed and crippled, leaving no place for their children. Despite the hard and unmistakable fact that this is *the* New Orleans industry, *Treme* seems to view this industry and its workers perversely through a life of a white woman chef whose black *sous-chef* has a French accent and turns out to be from Haiti, speaking of even worse and more powerless disasters. Once again, we are not looking at New Orleans in *Treme* at all, because *Treme* is only dedicated to giving the viewers a deeper glimpse into the tourism culture, and that means that *Treme* only really cares about the experience of the “eaters,” the tourists, and not the New Orleans of workers and whatnot, no matter how many high-end kitchen b-rolls we see.

I don’t even want to touch the character that is a white former DJ, trying to be a rapper in our city that, speaking of music, is currently more famous for our hip-hop and rappers than virtually anything else. Normally, it would be obvious that he merely is a comic distraction, inserted as an object of ridicule and buffoonery, but in *Treme* he somehow “gets the girl.” One of the truest notes in the show slipped out in the second season when he admitted he had gone to Newman, an exclusive, uptown prep school, which to hometown folks just about said everything about this dude! It also says yet more about *Treme*’s losing struggle to come to terms with the reality of race in the real city which can only be ignored in the tourist’s ghetto of New Orleans, where Simon and his team seem lost and captured.

*Treme* is knocking on the door of the tension around race and post-Katrina New Orleans when it films the housing situation for the DJ, the fiddle player, and their often disturbed, overly tolerant gay neighbors living in the neighborhood of Treme not far from WWOZ with its tolerant DJ (white) and exasperated station manager (black) and the ex-boyfriend, guitar player (white from the Netherlands), who also lives in Treme not far away. Strangely, all of this is greeted without comment whatsoever, though the unguided camera is unwittingly filming a current New Orleans reality of extreme gentrification in the high ground areas on all sides of the French Quarter. Treme and similar neighborhoods are being bleached.

The U.S. Census of 2010 confirmed statistically the most obnoxious hopes of New Orleans businessmen and other elites that the entire city was whiter and richer (Krupa 2011). Furthermore, the census categorically confirmed that the two areas that changed most dramatically were those neighborhoods most like the Treme of *Treme*, Bywater right downriver, and the Irish Channel directly upriver from the CBD. Where both of these areas had been 65 percent African American before Katrina and 35 percent white and Latino, now they had both totally flipped and in the new hipster, gentrified city were now 65 percent white and 35 percent African American and Latino. *Treme* is running from race as fast as it can and silently tripping over its own camera work while doing so. Strange, but true, and very disappointing.

Using Wendell Pierce, a New Orleans native from Press Park, the first African American suburban development in the city, as perhaps the key character doesn’t give *Treme* the cover it needs on race. He’s a trombone-playing, good times, skirt-chasing scamp, and he plays it to the hilt, but that’s simply another caricature. For some

reason, Simon chose a cartoon figure rather than someone who felt like a real working musician from the city. Of course, that would have been harder. It would have meant pulling rappers off of project and neighborhood stoops, singers from the choir, and players from the wharves, cabstands, and long corridors of banquet waiters in the belly of the downtown hotel and convention centers. This is a show about lazy and not that kind of hard work. If you want to be a serious musician in tourist-*Treme*, then the message of the show is that you need to be based in New York, perhaps curse in Dutch, play the violin, or something else.

Phyllis Montana, the real daughter of a former Mardi Gras Indian chief, is one of the few touches of reality anywhere near all of this, and her line about Pierce getting a “job job” rather than all of these gigs was a lightening shot of black, working-class reality in the show. I can still remember having organized a union for carriage drivers in the French Quarter some years ago and their endless arguments about whether their work was a “job” or a “hustle,” and all that went with including wages, benefits, respect, and dignity. True story!

Speaking of caricatures, in *Treme* all New Orleans politics and its politicians are corrupt and incompetent. Yawn. This is the rap, not the reality. It’s a disgruntled businessman’s insult, an uptown club perspective, the outsider’s assumption, and the tourist’s wink-and-nod. This is not about New Orleans politics or how power works. It’s as colonial as the public playschool preparation for Englishmen being sent to administer the British Raj in India and needing to have some quick stereotypes handy to recognize the natives. The Simon of *The Wire* knew better. It’s time for that Simon to come back to work on *Treme*.

I could almost live with all of that and still be OK, if the references to Katrina were not so painful in tourist-*Treme*. Katrina is still a raw, open wound here, so much so that I know someone who couldn’t watch a show during the first season without weeping. The show does pull at some heartstrings for locals, although, in my view, Katrina in *Treme* is just a docudrama footnote and little more.

The real-life drama every family experienced of return, rebuilding, rejection, and recovery just doesn’t make it into *Treme*. In real life, the resilience of people to return and remake the city is one of the great American dramas of heroic heroism of low- and moderate-income working people of all races and backgrounds. It hurts me and is painful for me to have to watch every *Treme* episode and think about how much is missed.

Working with ACORN in New Orleans, we had a front-row, frontline seat in that struggle, but like everything that has to do with real people in the city, working and lower-income people, particularly African Americans and now Latinos, that have been and will be the majority of the city, and those struggles and victories that prevented the hijacking of New Orleans, its neighborhoods, and people. That story will simply remain hidden for the real citizens of New Orleans, rather than the tourists who are visiting *Treme*.

To tell that story and come to understand New Orleans as a living, breathing unique American city, *Treme* would have to come to terms with power, which it seems

unwilling to do. *Treme* thinks that power is about low-end deals for single-family houses being displaced by the proposed construction of a new hospital in Mid-City, when it was actually about big business interests and developers trying to turn the city's clock back to create a richer, whiter city that would suit them and their interests better. Thank god, *Treme* has not tried to look at the Lower 9th Ward or it would probably believe the story is about Brad Pitt, rather than understanding how big the battle was for lower-income, working African American citizens and their organizations to win the right to return and the ability to rebuild as all of the forces of power aligned to prevent their homecoming. Many believe this is still the case, but once again, you wouldn't know it by watching *Treme*.

*Treme* thinks that the story of "power" is about penny ante bribes rather than the uprooting of democratic entitlements and governance traditions that are normal elsewhere in America. We may be sympathetic to a school band in a KIPP charter school, but *Treme* does not want us to look at the usurpation of New Orleans public schools by a Washington \$20-million charter school federal "bribe" to install charter schools with the help of a ruthless state takeover from Baton Rouge. *Treme* wants to look at some small fast dealing in the footprint of the new Mid-City hospital construction and overlooks the attempt to remove all land use and financial controls from elected officials and replace them with appointed boards with no accountability, and the continual multibillion-dollar efforts to divert resources from rebuilding to pet projects and upscale developments that ended up with a planning process and recovery plan for commercial districts and not for neighbor residents all financed by outside interests and out-of-town foundations. The allied forces that pull the levers of power in New Orleans can be happy with *Treme* because its tourist view of the city is not interested in any more than chipping at the paint on the row houses along the streets of the French Quarter and its abutting neighborhoods or in seeing the soul of the city past the music drifting from the bars. In that sense, this is pure entertainment and a continuing tourist attraction, and as long as *Treme* walks on the Quarter side of Canal Street and doesn't really venture too deeply into the Central Business District or City Hall, then it's all good, *laissez les bon temps rouler*.

I was driving to the gym the other day in my truck. I still have a "Call ACORN – Hurricane Recovery" sign on the back. I will always ride for the brand. A car came up Rampart Street as I drove along the Treme neighborhood boundary line and started honking. My passenger side window was down, so that when he caught up to me, I looked over. A guy was grinning with his thumb up, and I could see him mouthing the words, "Yeah, ACORN!" as he signaled and turned right past Esplanade Avenue.

*Treme* is better than nothing about New Orleans, but there's a great show about the real city and its people that is still waiting to be made. Sadly, *Treme* is not that show. At least not yet.

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## Note

1. ACORN was the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, a membership organization at its peak of 500,000 low- and moderate-income families in the United States working from more than 100 different cities, and headquartered in New Orleans from 1978 until 2010, when it ceased operations.

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## Bio

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