

The Long Way Home

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Gwen Thompkins, at home in New Orleans, discusses the origins and evolution of Louisiana music every week on her radio show, "Music Inside Out." (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

At this writing, I hear footsteps on my roof as workmen repair damage from a recently fallen tree. Make that a large tree. No, make that the Hammer of Thor.

It was an old Chinese tallow, otherwise known as a gray popcorn, or even a chicken tree. These are not names of distinction. The U.S. Geological Survey's most common descriptor for the Chinese tallow is "invasive," which is like a really bad "Yelp" rating, but in nature. As it turns out, that 40-foot pile of chicken smashed my air conditioner like a clove of roasted garlic.

I could describe what it feels like to live in New Orleans over summer break without cool air, or what insurance adjusters are like, or the relationship among air-conditioning compressors, hydrochlorofluorocarbons and the Montreal Protocol. But instead, Cole Porter comes to mind:

It was just one of those things

Just one of those crazy flings

One of those bells that now and then rings

Just one of those things

Fact is, I've seen worse. We all have. This summer marks the 10th anniversary of one of the biggest hammers of Thor to hit New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Her name was Katrina and may she die a thousand miserable deaths.

The hurricane and flood set in motion a series of events that sent me scrambling around the world. Yes, I made it back—and with a fistful of frequent flier miles. But in the spirit of Odysseus, who spent 10 years en route home to his kingdom—through wars and weather, Lotus-Eaters, cannibals, a cyclops and an angry god—I can't help but think there had to be an easier way. Leaving home shouldn't involve so much water, so many deaths and such a long tail of recovery. But it does make for a good story. *The Odyssey* has never been out of print.

New Orleans isn't my kingdom, exactly, but my tether to the city has always been strong. I was born here, schooled here, secured my first job here. Even after moving to Washington, D.C., for a position at National Public Radio, I came home often. I paid taxes here, visited my dentist here, wrote checks on my bank account here. This went on for 10 years, until there was no "here" here.

Shortly after the storm, NPR producer Sarah Oliver and I made music-rich stories about New Orleans-in-recovery.

The NPR audience responded enthusiastically. We even received a note from the late Ed Bradley of CBS, who loved New Orleans like a native. Bradley understood that there are places in the world where music cannot be separated from daily life. And the tragedy of post-Katrina New Orleans was that the music had stopped. No bass drum. No buzz rolls on the snare. No Irma Thomas at the Lion's Den. No birdsong.

That made for a profound and uncomfortable silence.

But the U.S. Army Survival Manual, which I'd gotten hold of while evacuating the city, proved invaluable:

â? Your present discomfort is a temporary problem â? knowing how much discomfort you can take and understanding your demand for comfort will help you to carry on. Comfort is not essential!

The exclamation point was the Army's idea, not mine. But they're right: Attitude may be the most vital asset in surviving any reversal—a hurricane, a cyclops or even East Africa—which was my next reporting assignment.

I took the job as NPR's East Africa bureau chief in 2006 because I wanted to be a foreign correspondent. And I knew it would take time to rebuild my house in Pontchartrain Park. So rather than wallow in Washington, it seemed a good idea to light out like Odysseus and take the long way home.

In retrospect, Odysseus may not have been the best role model. He was always in trouble, sometimes of his own making. But that's the bane and fun of being an East Africa correspondent—anticipating trouble, or at the very least working around it: mosquitoes, equipment failure, mosquitoes, a flat tire in the desert, jungle mud, pirates, blackouts, bedbugs, roadblocks, monkeys, snakes, armed rebellion and, of course, mosquitoes. The likelihood of any of the above determined how to prepare for a reporting trip. On a quick science assignment to Antarctica in 2008, a whole new set of potential troubles emerged. Those were â? colder.

Over time, I began to look for opportunities to tell stories with music (within reason). I wrote about Kenya's fascination with Dolly Parton. I wrote about Ugandan civil war songs, Rastafarians in Ethiopia and a fern bar in South Sudan that played R&B

music nonstop. I recorded cruise ship workers dancing in the polar night to Usher, Lil Jon and Ludacris. As it turns out, music is an excellent reporting device worldwide because nothing transports an audience to a new reality quite as fast.

Once I traveled from northern Sudan to New Orleans in three notes or less. I'd been detained overnight in a visa flap west of the capital city of Khartoum. And a long day of arguing with Sudanese officials had made me feel as drained as the desiccated camels lying dead on the side of the highway. With a heavy heart, I turned on the truck radio and heard a voice from my hometown:

*It's very clear, our love is here to stay
Not for a year, but forever and a day
The radio and the telephone
And movies that we know
May just be passing fancies
And in time may go â?|*

Never have Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald made such an impression. Thanks to them and the Gershwin brothers, I knew it was time to come home. It took awhile, but by 2012, I was back in my house in Pontchartrain Park and host of the public radio program [“Music Inside Out.”](#) The show is a giant valentine to the people and culture of this extraordinary part of the world.

Louisiana's musical landscape is like no other. And we discuss its origins and evolution every week.

What we do is a form of explanatory journalism that just happens to sound like a rollicking good time. And the formula works because our guests make learning fun.

Most recently, we spoke with Rickie Lee Jones, who now lives in New Orleans and has released a new, locally produced album called *The Other Side of Desire*. That's such a good title. Because when reaching a destination?through tempests and adventure?all travelers come to the other side of desire. Sure, there's the occasional discomfort of a chicken tree, or?in Odysseus" case?a doubtful wife in Ithaca. But he had his Hollywood ending, and so did I. We both made it home.

Gwen Thompkins is a Visiting Scholar at Newcomb College Institute. “Music Inside

Out” airs on WWNO-FM on Thursdays at 7 p.m. and Saturdays at noon.

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