

NEW ORLEANS WALLS: STILL STANDING



Marie-Dominique Verdier

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PREFACE

This book is a celebration of the people of New Orleans, coming from all walks of life, and bound together by a common passion for the city. It is also a tribute to the spirit of the city itself, perhaps contained (to some extent) within its walls — those still standing and those crumbled, yet remembered.

There is an old cliché: “What if walls could talk?” Well, walls may not literally speak, but (like other inanimate things) they hold within them a potential for expression. The artistic vision for the New Orleans Walls series first came to me in 1994 when a local musician asked me to take pictures for the cover of his upcoming album. He had chosen an old, weathered, colorful wall in the French Quarter as the background. Although the “portrait” aspect of the photo was interesting, it was the image of the wall behind the subject that made an indelible impression on me. Being from France, I missed the old buildings and walls of Europe. Such structures are evidence of the rich, collective memory of a place. I had obviously seen many New Orleans walls on a daily basis while living there, but that 1994 photo shoot made me pay attention to them. From that one wall came the inspiration for this project.

In the following months, I started looking around for unique locations, knowing I wanted to capture their visual intrigue, yet not entirely sure how to accomplish this. Then one day it came to me — I would double-

expose images of people against the walls. So I called some friends to ask them to model for me. Many of the scenes were staged, but unexpected conditions and changing circumstances forced me to improvise, which gave the pictures an even greater appeal. Shot with a 35mm camera, each of these original pictures was printed from a single negative. These photographs were presented as my first gallery show in 1997, entitled *New Orleans Walls*. Envisioning the project and working on the original pictures was extremely gratifying on an artistic level, as well as on an emotional one. I was blessed to live in New Orleans for ten years, and even though I left in 2000, I still feel an organic connection to the city and its people.

During a conversation with a friend in early 2008, I was inspired to revisit the New Orleans Walls idea, realizing only then that the original project felt strangely incomplete. She suggested that I do it again; but this time instead of using friends as models I would use “emblematic” New Orleanians. The logistics seemed complicated, since I had, by that time, moved 2,600 miles away.

Moreover, I wondered why emblematic New Orleanians would want to pose for me. My friend's response was, "That will be the easy part!"

Later that year, I flew back to the Crescent City. During this one-week trip I drove around, scouting walls and taking only a few pictures — this time using a digital camera. Like many people, I was overwhelmed by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and further disturbed when I realized that three years after the storm, many Americans were still disconnected from the city's tragic situation. On my next trip the following spring, I decided to use the project to raise funds for a nonprofit organization committed to rebuilding New Orleans. Although most of the city's walls were still standing, many needed to be rebuilt or repaired. So, when it came time to choose a beneficiary for the sales of the book, I chose the St. Bernard Project (www.StBernardProject.org), whose mission is to create housing opportunities for Katrina survivors who wish to return to their homes and communities — walls and all.

New Orleans has so many "characters" that any attempt to be comprehensive would have been futile, and as it is, I am grateful that so many people trusted me enough to pose for the photos. What turned out to be more challenging than finding models was the logistics of photographing them with the walls. On my first trip back to New Orleans I had envisioned finding walls,

and having models meet me at a chosen location. Well, by that time I had become detached from the demands of "urban living," and had forgotten that what takes five minutes to drive in my small North Idaho town takes at least 30 minutes in a major metropolitan area. If I hadn't changed my strategy, I would never have gotten any photos taken. So I decided to use, almost exclusively, walls that could be found in the neighborhoods where the models lived. Finding each wall took an average of 45 minutes, while taking the actual picture took a fraction of that time. For most of the photographs, I already had a vision in my head. This vision, combined with the individual flair of each model, gave rise to the overall effect, which preserves the "inner life" of each wall, the distinctive personality of the model, and (most importantly) the interaction between the two.

Although my original idea was to create a book of photographs, a couple of things happened along the way that altered this plan: First of all, I started to revisit the meaning of why I began the project in the first place, which had been (in part) my way of confronting and tearing down my own "inner" walls. Using photography, as well as the highly-charged and personally meaningful subject matter of New Orleans, offered an opportunity to explore this theme of "walls" in a way that could transcend my own experience, and move the project toward something more universal.

Secondly, the models started talking to me during the photo shoots, and their dialogue sparked an idea for a new dimension of the project. I asked people to share specific, significant moments in their lives, providing the unique texts that now accompany the photos. These narratives have no direct connection with the images, other than the fact that the models are the ones telling them, and there is obviously a "New Orleans connection." Although not all of the pictures have an accompanying story, those collected were recorded from the models and later transcribed, a process that has been extremely gratifying. The stories made me laugh and also cringe, gave me goose bumps, had me dumbfounded, and left me wanting more.

New Orleans Walls has been sixteen years in the making. The resulting images and text speak to the resilience and the character of the people of New Orleans. In front of these walls, the models let down their own personal barriers, and shared with me the joy, sadness, pride, fear, astonishment, love, wistfulness, strength and hope that is so common to the residents of this great American city.

It is my hope that the photos and stories will move you as well.

Marie-Dominique Verdier
Sandpoint, Idaho, Fall 2010

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Pulling up in a taxi at night after the long flight from London, I was here. New Orleans, the mythical place I'd been hearing stories about for most of my seventeen years. My first adventure — no money, no return ticket, and no question that everything was going to be just fine. In my left hand I held a bag with a change of clothes, and in my right I clutched a book of matches with the logo, address, and phone number of the Maple Leaf Bar.

Standing with my suitcase on the sidewalk of Oak Street, bedazzled, bewildered, and jet-lagged, I remember (as vividly now as if it were last night) peering through the dimly lit front door of the bar. Someone handed me my first cold Dixie, and I swiveled around on the rickety stool to get a view of the stage just as Earl King walked up to the microphone and closed his eyes. For me, at that moment, everything froze. He dug into a big B7 chord with a raised 5 on a cheap guitar, took a deep breath, and sang it out loud: "There's been some lonely, lonely nites."

Jon Cleary, *pianist*



"Reaching Out"



One evening around 6 o'clock I was sitting at the Fly by the river, having a beer, and this guy pulled up in a canoe on the Mississippi River. He looked like a real mountain man-type dude who had been traveling for a long time. The guys playing Frisbee ran down, threw him a beer (which he happily accepted), and they helped him carry his canoe out. It turned out this guy was from Memphis and had just canoed down to New Orleans for the adventure. I think it took him about a week to get to New Orleans. It's dangerous and against the law, too, so the whole trip he had to kind of hug the bank, and hide out to make sure he wasn't stopped. I love that he went through "against the grain" and did something kind of insane, and also that New Orleans was his destination, re-creating something that historically must have happened many times.

If I had been there an hour before or after, I wouldn't have seen it. I guess *random* is the word: it was a pretty random thing to witness. It's not like he publicized it or wanted people to know about it. It was pure chance that I got to see the end of his journey.

Jac Currie, *Defend New Orleans* founder