

# Buskers of the French Quarter: Street Musicians and Their Spots

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**Abstract.** New Orleans is associated with revelry, unique architecture and culture, and the rich, musical tapestry woven by its inhabitants. These converge in the French Quarter, which attracts not only tourists but aspiring musicians. Street performers (buskers) struggle to eat while building their careers. Utilizing GPS waypoints and participant-observation, I uncover patterns in choices of performance locations. This cultural geography unpacks the motivations behind site determination - as it relates to the success and technical abilities of particular performers. This makes visible the cognitive map of buskers, a critical component of the informal sector of the local tourist economy.

## 1. Introduction

During the summer of 2013, I went to New Orleans, and my goal in this project was to look at the movement of musicians in the area surrounding Jackson Square in the French Quarter of New Orleans throughout the day and week by taking GPS points. Additionally, I wanted to examine the placement of various styles of music. Not only were there vastly different genres, but also the scale of investment on the part of the musicians varied greatly; while one musician attempted to sell their highly produced CDs at \$10-\$20, less than a mile away, another played in the hopes of scrounging enough to eat. Key to achieving these goals are the selection and competition for particular locations, leading me to ask what it is about these particular spots that are appealing. I chose to focus on the French Quarter, since it is a centralized location that draws a huge number of tourists and one of the major areas people busk (play on the street for tips).

New Orleans is the birthplace of jazz, and has a rich history of music with its complex history and influences from the French, Spanish, African-American and Afro-Caribbean slaves. The history, architecture, music and notoriety as a party destination with Bourbon Street and Mardi Gras all draw in tourists the world over, with the French Quarter at the heart of it all. These musicians who play in the streets for spare change comprise an important piece of the tapestry that makes this city the unique site that lives in the collective imagination of America. By examining the location of buskers, motivations behind this, and by bringing their lived experiences to light, it is my goal to broaden and enrich the academic discourse on the topic, while giving these musicians a platform to tell their stories.

## 2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

As far as methods, I walked up and down the four, square blocks around Jackson Square twice a day, usually around noon/early afternoon and again in early evening. Whenever I came across a musician, I recorded a GPS waypoint, wrote down the number, along with a brief description of genre, the surroundings, and what their setup was like. I also took photos and short videos of many of them. I loaded the GPS points into Google Earth, sorted and color-coded the waypoints in accordance with what kind of music group they were, and their level of technological sophistication and professionalism. For example, if they had CDs for sale and if they used electric equipment. Figure 1 is the map with all of my collected waypoints.

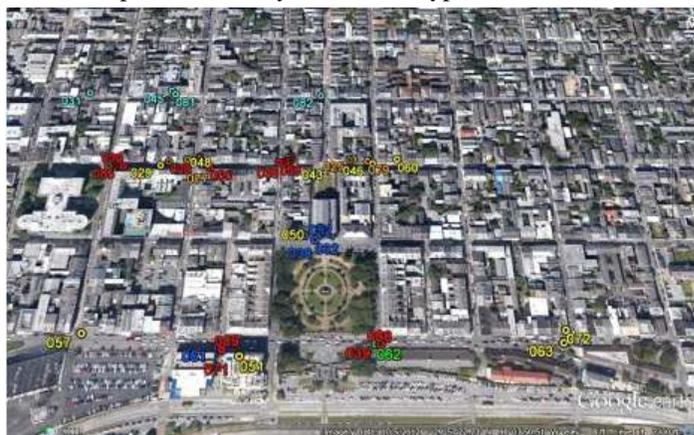


Figure 1

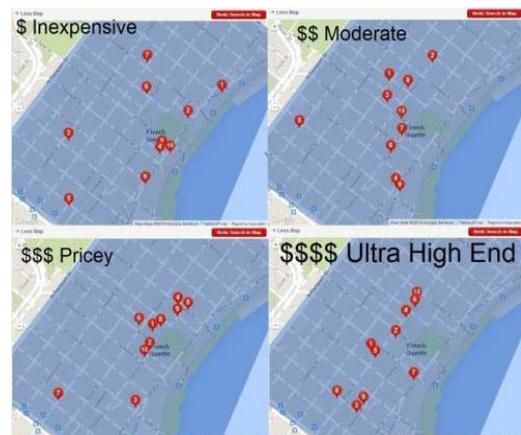


Figure 2

The red points are those who are both using electric equipment and selling CDs, which tend to congregate around a few nodes, but the line that forms is Royal Street. The vast majority of this grouping of musicians was centered on the intersections of Royal Street. The orange points are musicians selling CDs, but not using electricity, and the yellow points are musicians doing neither. When looking at the set ups of those who used electricity and/or sold CDs, I noticed their baskets and containers were more solid, not ad hoc. Whereas the small groups used buckets and crates to sit on, they use actual tables and chairs, and solid, permanent signs.

As indicated by my GPS points, Royal Street is the most desired spot to play. While looking around the street, attempting to uncover what it is about Royal Street, I noted the shops were expensive jewelry stores, clothing stores, and fancy art galleries. The clientele drawn to these shops are walking around with the mindset that they will spend a large amount of money. Additionally, Royal Street is positioned between Decatur, which is a major roadway and serves as the entrance to the area where tourist knick knacks are sold and tours are arranged, and Bourbon Street, another major tourist attraction. Royal is ideal to play because you already have people walking around looking at expensive items, and more likely to spend \$10-\$20 on a CD, as well as tourist traffic moving about, especially at the cross roads of the intersections.

Yelp.com is a website to share information about businesses in one's local area. Using Yelp's 'sort by price range' feature, I examined all businesses listed under 'Shopping' for the French Quarter and attained a sample size of ten for each price bracket, as illustrated in Figure 2. The price brackets are listed as \$, \$\$, \$\$\$ and \$\$\$\$. Their explanations for what this means are Inexpensive, Moderate, Pricey and Ultra High End, respectively. On the Ultra High End map, the strong line of points comprises Royal Street, where musicians play in high volumes. The other three price bracket maps of Figure 2 are fairly scattered. However, on the \$ map, there is a handful of shops on Decatur Street, which is where a portion of the small scale musicians who were not on Royal tend to play.

### **3. Conclusions**

After analyzing the GPS points along with the observational data that I collected during my time in the French Quarter, I conclude that the smaller scale musicians are more scattered about, in some cases survival based, and set up in places where they collect more spare change. It is still worth their time to play in locations that would be considered a waste of time for those who have a higher technological investment, and want to collect large bills and sell CDs. By comparing the plotted points of where musicians are playing, and their level of technical complexity to the arrangement of expensive shops, we can see there is a degree of overlap between the two. The more professional set ups went along with locations that are more likely to draw people willing to spend 10-20 dollars on a CD.

### **4. Acknowledgements**

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