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Opinion & National

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'THE HOLY LAND: NEW ORLEANS, THE SAINT: LOUIS ARMSTRONG'

Reviving memories of Satchmo's New Orleans

Two musicians evoke the way it was with vintage photos of the '60s-'70s.

By HIROKI HISAMATSU

The Asahi Shimbun

Forty years ago, Yoshio and Keiko Toyama, two budding jazz musicians, crossed the Pacific and made their way to New Orleans—the birthplace of Dixieland jazz. The couple lived there for five years, soaking up the rhythms of this musical heartland.

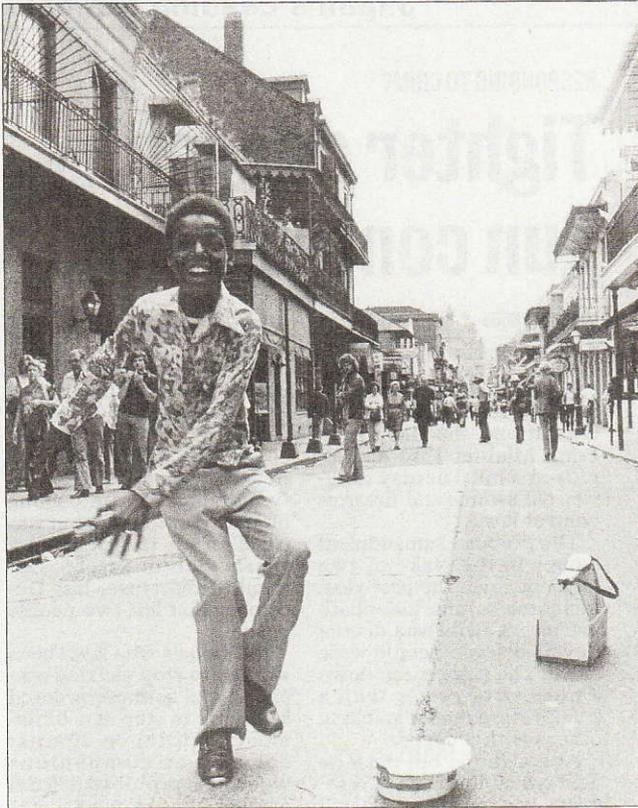
Now, the city of their youth has been devastated by hurricanes and the ravages of time. Hoping to preserve their memories of old New Orleans, the Toyamas sifted through their thousands of photographs of the city's musical nightlife to produce their book, "Seichi New Orleans, Seija Louis Armstrong" ("The Holy Land: New Orleans, The Saint: Louis Armstrong," published this year by Tosei-sha, 1,890 yen).

It is a warm photographic account of their memories from 1968 to 1973 of the birthplace of jazz and Satchmo.

Yoshio, 64, and Keiko, 66, now live in Urayasu, Chiba Prefecture. They regularly perform with other Dixieland jazz musicians under the name Yoshio Toyama and Dixie Saints.

Yoshio, a trumpet player like Armstrong, goes by the nickname "Japanese Satchmo." He even sings like his hero. Keiko strums along on the banjo.

The couple first went to New Orleans in January 1968. They had met in college as members of the same jazz appreciation circle. Eventually they found jobs and wed.



PROVIDED BY YOSHIO AND KEIKO TOYAMA



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HIROKI HISAMATSU

Yoshio and Keiko Toyama, left, captured scenes of New Orleans in the 1960s-'70s: Far left: A shoeshine boy on Bourbon Street, the main drag of the French Quarter, tap dances for tips to music spilling out from nearby bars; above: a brass band performs outdoors.

They both loved Satchmo's music so much that after a year or so, they both quit their jobs and embarked on a ship sailing to the United States.

In New Orleans, their apartment had broken windows, and the bed was moldy. The kitchen was crawling with bugs.

"But the whole town was swinging," Yoshio recalls.

The civil rights movement was going strong. The atmosphere was brimming with hope for the social advancement of African-Americans.

One of the most memorable scenes they recall in the French Quarter was the traditional jazz funeral. Unique

to New Orleans black culture, a jazz funeral amounts to a slow march of family, friends and jazzmen paying solemn tribute to the deceased as the funeral cortege makes its way to the cemetery.

Such marches attracted a hundred or more participants, with followers called "the second line" bringing up the rear.

Once the deceased is interred, the mood shifts dramatically, with an upbeat tempo replacing the somber rhythms of the procession. The band bursts into raucous Dixieland music and the second line cuts loose in celebration of life.

More than a decade after they left, the Toyamas paid a

return visit to NOLA—by now, it was also known as "Murder City."

Things had changed. The city seemed to have lost its carefree vivaciousness. At schools in the central districts, metal detectors were installed at entrances to keep weapons out.

Back in Japan, the Toyamas started collecting unused instruments to send to children in New Orleans. Then in 2005, disaster struck in the form of Hurricane Katrina. The school they had been supporting was destroyed in the floods.

Last year, the couple visited New Orleans again. This time, they brought donations

and more musical instruments to the city's poorest neighborhood. Only about one out of every three destroyed homes had been reconstructed.

The rest were still in ruins.

Their book about the New Orleans they used to know includes 269 photographs, carefully culled from their collection of more than 10,000 images. They also penned essays on their memories.

"Time and natural disasters may have changed the town, but I hope the people haven't lost their love of music. I want the legacy of Saint Satchmo to live on," Yoshio says.