

Interlude: Congo Square

It has always been difficult for us to explain the “culture” of the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center. Many people who have visited us often say that, try as we may, talking and writing about it does not capture its essence, let alone the value of what is really taking place. You really have to come and see it to gain an appreciation for what is going on. In order to try to explain the culture of the Learning Center I will liberally make use of allegory and analogy in the remainder of this memoir.

In this Interlude I will briefly try and relay an intuitive feel for the essence of the Learning Center and its’ Telehub Network. And in the remaining sections I will discuss in a little more detail about of their basic impact, their intrinsic value and their looming possibilities.

Let us begin by considering the sociological images portrayed in the following discourse.



The Neville Brothers have a CD, “Live On Planet Earth”, which contains the song “Congo Square” written by Sonny Landreth. It is about that area of New Orleans where African Americans back in the day were free to gather and play music of their own liking, their own style, in whichever manner they chose to play. It is from there that the art form of jazz was created. Their rendition is laced with percussive rhythms in the background and punctuated with searing saxophone rifts. Its lyrics are as follows:

*Well it might be superstitious
But some kind of something is going on down there.
(Repeated)*

*Well it’s an old time tradition
When they play them drums at night in Congo Square.
You can hear them in the distance—
Old folks in the bayou say your prayers.
(Repeated)*

*That’s when them voodoo people gather
And play them drums at night in Congo Square.
Well my eyes would not believe it
But what I seen that night I could not turn away.
(Repeated)*

*They had that mojo in motion
I seen them dancing and prancing with that sway.*

The more I listened to this song, the more I thought of it as a metaphor of people experiencing the culture of the Learning Center.



The musicians of the “Classic” Congo Square drew from the spirit of their “old time tradition” to express what was in their beleaguered souls and brought forth a new

music that was a wonder to behold. A century later, there were those of us who were concerned about the acculturation and education of our youth. So like those Congo Square musicians, we too were inspired to come together and generate musings that led to the birth of a new concept. For me, the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center, together with its Telehub Network, is likened unto a “Contemporary” Congo Square.

Back then, the life that Africa’s descendants here in America had to live was stressful to say the least. It was lived with a kind of resignation. And sometimes just to get some relief they would gather unto themselves so that they could relax in their own way and enjoy doing things in ways that felt good to them. Music was a healing balm. But it had to be applied in their own way in order to soothe their weary souls. The musical instruments and styles Africa’s descendants found here in America were unlike those from whence they came. But once here, they learned to adjust and use what they had available to them, and apply their own styles and techniques drawing from their own cultural patterns and traditions. And in so doing they improvised and created a new art form. This dynamic unfolded in many aspects of their lives in their struggles to both survive and thrive here. And that is just as true today as it was then.

With the emergence of the Information Age, Africa’s descendants of today are doing much of the same. New technologies give rise to new infrastructures that can be developed and taken advantage of in the acculturation of today’s youth. And like the participants of Congo Square of old used what they had to address their needs, we have a similar challenge confronting us today. The Learning Center’s Telehub Network is an example of using today’s technology, drawing upon cultural patterns and traditions inherent in our urban cores, to develop such an infrastructure. How this unfolded was described in the previous chapters.

When I reflect on the first verse, it appears to me to deal more with the senses: “it might be superstitious.” They just felt that “some kind of something is going on down there.” Similarly, in the early years of the Learning Center, people would tell us that they felt that some kind of something is going on over here.

But like back in the day when Africa’s descendants gathered to address the needs of their weary souls by *playing drums* in Congo Square at night, we in this day gather to address the needs of our children’s weary academic souls by *displaying academic insight* in the Learning Center on Saturday mornings and evenings. And over time, people in our community have begun to feel that something was going on “over there.” However, as the song says, it was in keeping with “an old time tradition” to come together to acquire and receive that healing balm that may be difficult, if not impossible, to attain otherwise.

The second verse indicates that it is more obvious what is going on in Congo Square because you can “*hear* them in a distance.” And “old folks in the Bayou” were even advised to “say your prayers.” Likewise, as the Learning Center had been operating for awhile, people became more aware of what we were doing, primarily by word of mouth. And some folks have even told us that what we were doing was an answer to their prayers.

Where the song says “voodoo people gather,” for me that can be thought of as saying people of like minds and spirits, or people who are culturally and traditionally

attuned to each other, come together. But in this case the “voodoo people” are Africa’s descendants. The implication here is the continuing influence of their African culture.

Voodoo is regarded by most people as simply something like a cult or witchcraft, something magical and/or something highly superstitious. But those who have seriously studied it, like anthropologists, realize that it is much more complicated than that. They have a better understanding of it, and as a consequence, have a different appreciation of it. They understand that it is actually a secret society that you have to be initiated into. It has practices that pertain to the healing arts, herbal medicines and psychological nuances that stem from ancient African traditions. (By-the-way, both author Zora Neal Hurston and dancer Katherine Dunham studied anthropology and were initiated into it. And the documentations they made of some of their findings and insights verify these observations.)

Similarly, when jazz first came about, it was not looked upon in high regard by those who were not in tune with the culture that produced it. For those who were, its’ rhythms continued to resonate, and to address their heartfelt needs. (And lest we forget: Back in the seventies a lot of us were listening “In a Silent Way,” and some still do, as “Miles Runs the Voodoo Down.”) As for others, the more it was gotten into and understood, the more their appreciation of it grew. By comparison, when one simply hears or reads about the Learning Center, one’s usual impression is that it is an admirable but simplistic approach to address an age old heartfelt concern—the desire to work with our youth. But inevitably, those who come and see it in operation, to witness it first hand, realize that there is much more depth to what is happening there than whatever one’s original impression may have been. There is a cultural interaction impacting the acculturation, as well as the education, of our youth that one does not appreciate or grasp otherwise.

In both cases, Congo Square and the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center, an aspect of cultural needs were met. People would tell tales of the uplifting of spirits they had received from their participation in Congo Square. Similar comments have been made by parents who brought their children to the DuBois Learning Center. Shortly after the turn of the millennium, the Kansas City, Missouri School District commissioned a California organization to conduct a survey of their parents whose children attended the DLC in order to ascertain their opinion as to how beneficial the Learning Center was to their children. And over 90% of the responses were in the top two categories—excellent or good.

That brings us to the third and final verse. This is where it becomes clearer just what is going on, or just what is taking place, in Congo Square. And even when witnessing it, one is still amazed: “my eyes could not believe it.” But the fascination is apparently spellbinding: “what I seen that night I could not turn away.”

This verse is reminiscent of comments we hear regularly regarding people’s impression, as alluded to above, when they visit the Learning Center for the first time. I became aware of this in the mid seventies when Morris Brown, a co-worker at Allied Signal, brought it to my attention. The late Ron Jones was an electrical engineer who tutored advanced mathematics with me and was also a co-worker of ours. Ron and I had been telling Brown about the DLC for months, and we regularly invited him to visit us.

Finally one Saturday he took us up on it. The next Monday I asked him what he thought. He put his pen down on his desk, spun his chair around, and looked me dead in the eye and told me something like: “Dick, y’all been telling me about the Center for months. But you can’t tell anybody about it. You have to go and see it.”

We have had similar experiences ever since. I can recall Bill Grace trying to explain the concept of the Learning Center during a long distance conversation. And I remember Leah Russell, our CFO, saying to him: “Bill, you can’t explain it to anyone. No matter what you say, they just won’t understand it.”

Long story short: You have to see “that mojo in motion,” you have to actually see the “dancing and prancing with that sway” to comprehend what is really “going on down there.”

For me, in analyzing this song, the analogy between Congo Square and the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center is both nuanced and striking. But at the heart of it all is the reality of how creative a people can be in addressing their needs when they are free to be, and *choose to be*, true to themselves.

With that in mind, I shall conclude this Interlude with the words in the title of one of Nina Simone’s most significant albums: “Nuff Said.”