



# **Song for My Fathers: A New Orleans Story in Black and White**

*Tom Sancton*

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## **Tulane Reading Project 2006**

Former Time Paris Bureau Chief and bestselling author Tom Sancton returns to the New Orleans of his youth and the music that shaped and guided his life.

Song for my Fathers is the story of a young white boy driven by a consuming passion to learn the music and ways of a group of aging black jazzmen in the twilight years of the segregation era. Contemporaries of Louis Armstrong, most of them had played in local obscurity until Preservation Hall launched a nationwide revival of interest in traditional jazz. They called themselves “the mens.” And they welcomed the young apprentice into their ranks.

The boy was introduced into this remarkable fellowship by his father, an eccentric Southern liberal and failed novelist whose powerful articles on race had made him one of the most effective polemicists of the early Civil Rights movement. Nurtured on his father’s belief in racial equality, the aspiring clarinetist embraced the old musicians with a boundless love and admiration. In a sense, they became his spiritual fathers and role models. Meanwhile his real father, who had first led the boy to the “mens” and shared his reverence for them, later recoiled in horror at the idea that his son might lose his way in the world of late-night jazz joints, French Quarter bar rooms, and a precarious life on the margins of society. The tension between the father’s determination to control the boy’s destiny and his son’s abiding passion for the music is a major theme of the book.

The narrative unfolds against the vivid backdrop of New Orleans in the 1950s and ‘60s. But that magical town is more than decor; it is perhaps the central player, for this story could not have taken place in any other city in the world. Written several years before Katrina crashed into New Orleans and changed its face forever, Song for My Fathers seems all the more moving in the wake of that cataclysm.

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