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French Quarter, New Orleans, 2026, oil on board by [Jo Holdsworth](#). Courtesy [Wine Art Gallery](#), New Orleans. Holdsworth's work is currently on view at Wine Art Gallery

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Mister Anthony

By Saeed Jones

New Orleans, Louisiana

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“You an author?” my Lyft driver asks as I buckle my seatbelt.

“Yes?” I answer, looking up. Following his eyes in the rearview mirror, I realize he’s looking at the sign of the bookstore where he’s picked me up, Baldwin & Co. “Oh, yes. Got some good reading done today,” I add.

He nods and pulls us away from the curb. “That used to be a daiquiri store,” he explains. He’s happy to see a bookstore in this neighborhood. I mention that they make a point of stocking books by Black writers. He nods again.

I know from the app that his name is Anthony, but I put a Mister in front of it in my mind. Mister Anthony could be my grandfather, if my grandfather, a retired Memphis city bus driver, was still alive, still driving strangers from one stop to another. If my mother was still alive, she’d say, “Well, maybe part of him *was* your Grandpa.” It’s funny how some people, strangers especially, can cast your mind homeward just by their posture or the color of their voice.

At the stoplight, he scans two people crossing an empty lot and sucks his teeth, but doesn’t say why they’ve earned his attention. I’m sitting in the back of Mister Anthony’s car, but it feels like I’m sitting next to him on a porch, trying to see what he sees in all that passes by.

Mister Anthony is old enough to be retired, but he’s still taking gigs. He should be in somebody’s yard somewhere in New Orleans, playing Spades or dominos with his friends, sipping a taste from a red Solo cup if he likes. I don’t need to know this man to know he deserves to be at ease. Fewer and fewer of our elders are sitting on porches. Have you noticed? They’ve still got bills to pay. America is a trip. That’s something else Mom would say. Anything that wasn’t behaving as it should was a “trip” to her. I guess she meant “crazy,” like an acid trip.

But when I think about her turn of phrase now, I also hear her saying, “Everything takes you and your mind somewhere you don’t realize you need to be.” This is where my mind goes in between destinations.

“Where ya from?” Mister Anthony asks, pulling my mind back into the vehicle.

“Ohio. Columbus.”

“They must really hate y’all up there,” he laughs, patting the wheel.

“Why? WHO?” I laugh too, though I don’t get the joke. It really does feel like we’re playing Spades, and I’m terrible at cards.

“Black people from Ohio are always down here. Every chance y’all get.” He actually lets out a hoot this time. Mister Anthony is cracking himself up.

My laughter brightens now that I'm inside the joke with him. I've learned that drivers understand the comings and goings of cities in ways that passengers can't fathom. An editor told me once that if you want to understand a war, interview the grave diggers. I'd add that if you want to understand a city, interview the drivers. I tell Mister Anthony he's clocked me like a second hand and we both smile.

Feeling easier with him now, I tell Mister Anthony that, for over a decade, I've been coming to New Orleans a couple of times a year. I was here in September to see Beyoncé's Renaissance tour, and I'll be here again in February for Mardi Gras. I visited for the first time in 2011 and just kept coming back.

"Mmmhmm," he nods. "Ohio. Chicago. New York too. Y'all are always down here. I understand though. New Orleans is *New Orleans*. Nothing like it nowhere else."

"Born and raised?"

"No. From Mississippi," he says, then bites down a sound. "I got out of there when I was young. I tell people I'm *from* Mississippi. Those white people there . . ." Mister Anthony's mind runs home then races back. His hands tighten on the wheel.

I think about my trip to Oxford a few years ago, how different it felt from anywhere else I've ever lived or visited in the South, how I made sure to be in my hotel room before sundown every day. For all the ghosts and histories that weigh upon my body when I even think about the South, to say nothing of traveling through it, that trip was one of the few times I've actually been scared. It isn't just that the Civil War is still being fought there; in a town like Oxford, you're made keenly aware that you've landed in the heart of a proud, contemporary Confederacy.

I share all of this with Mister Anthony. I don't know exactly where I've steered our conversation, but I want him to know that I'm just as shook by that place as he is. "Mississippi is *different*," I say, to close out my thoughts, and actually let out a sigh. At the stoplight, he locks his eyes on mine in the rearview mirror.

"Those motherfuckers," he shouts. "Let me tell you something. I'm terminal. I've got three sisters. Two of them still live in Mississippi. Found out I was terminal and told 'em, and they just started crying and all that. I said *I'm terminal, I'm not dead yet*. I figure I'll make it to next Christmas."

Christmas was yesterday, I think. He's got one year to live and he's taking gigs.

"I told my sisters, I'll make it up there at least one more time to hug 'em. Just for them, since they were crying and all that. But I ain't staying. I ain't staying. Those white motherfuckers up there . . . Yeah, they *different*. Still trying to call me *boy*. Me, at my age! Motherfuckers. Last

time I was up there was to bury our brother. Shit. By the time they were leaving the church, I was already gone. My sisters were calling me. *Where you at? Where you go?* Shit. I was already on the highway, halfway back to New Orleans.”

Mister Anthony is laughing again now. Still mad as hell but laughing even as he smacks the side of the steering wheel. It’s a switchblade kind of laugh.

Like his sisters, I’m still hung up on his terminal diagnosis. Questions knot up my throat. How are you feeling now? Did you have a good Christmas? I want to tell Mister Anthony that America is a trip. I want to tell him that even though I know where we are, I can’t remember how we got here. Or maybe I want to tell him that I know exactly how we got here and that’s why it’s easier to forget sometimes, or often; why it’s easier to just be one of history’s passengers, to look out the window and pretend I don’t see the direction I’m traveling.

At the curb in front of my hotel, we’re both so caught up that there’s a breathlessness to our goodbyes. Asking Mister Anthony where he was born and raised has cast our mind out and away, and now we were both trying to pull ourselves back into ourselves.

“Please take good care, okay?” is all I’m able to sputter out, leaning back in the door.

“Yeah, I . . . Yeah,” he says, avoiding my eyes. “You, too.”

If America was doing right by someone like Mister Anthony, I would not have met him today.



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A man wearing a white cowboy hat, sunglasses, and a light blue t-shirt is playing a harmonica. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. A logo for the 83rd National Folk Festival is overlaid on the image. The logo features a stylized map of Mississippi with the text "83rd NATIONAL FOLK FESTIVAL" and "NOV. 13-15 2026" inside it, and "JACKSON, MS" below it. The background is a solid blue color.

NOV 13-15 2026

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I sit at the hotel bar again that evening for dinner. I first checked into the hotel on Christmas Eve; this is my third night in a row having dinner alone at the bar. The tables mostly belong to

families that have gathered for the holiday. They sit in circles—some boisterous and more than a little tipsy, others clearly exhausted from their time together—sharing one last meal before dispersing across the country tomorrow. After seating another table, the host comes and checks on me. I ask how her kids liked the gifts she got them, and the way she smiles in response, sweeping her braids out of her eyes, adds several years to my life. Over the course of my trip, I've learned that she's a single mother with five kids. We've talked about why I became a writer, some of my favorite books. A waiter calls her away and she promises to check on me again later.

I sip my martini, realizing that I've become someone tender strangers feel the need to "check on." I guess I look lonely. Maybe she's right. Maybe I do need to be checked on. I'm honestly not sure how I feel. I imagine it's possible to be lonely and not even realize it. Maybe she misread the look on my face; it's been several hours and I'm still thinking about my ride with Mister Anthony. A blues rivered its way through the two of us during that drive. It tried calling us both home, cunning as a riptide. But home is as much about where you are as it is about where you ain't.

After Mister Anthony dropped me off, I didn't even go to my room. I sat down in the lobby, pulled out my laptop, and tried, as best I could, to write down everything I could remember about our time together.

Look, I know how that sounds. I'm a writer. There is a magpie quality to how I move through my days. At times, yes, it takes effort—maybe even integrity—to appreciate the life around me as life itself, not as characters, motifs, themes. But sometimes, writing about the life around me is the best way I can love it. Or maybe it's me trying to pray for what I've seen, to protect what I've witnessed and experienced. Sometimes, as I try to capture what I've seen on the page, I can almost feel myself kneeling and bowing my head.

Maybe to distract myself from the question of loneliness, I'm working to chart the depths of my ride with Mister Anthony. I'm interested in how people unexpectedly find one another. I refuse to romanticize the labor conditions and racial terror, for example, that played a role in introducing him to me. If America was doing right by someone like Mister Anthony, I would not have met him today. I know that fact like I know the blade of his laughter. But I am grateful I met him. Maybe it's easier, especially for men of his generation and journey, to set one's burdens down with a receptive stranger. Or maybe Mister Anthony is just like that with everyone and I happen to be a poet riding co-pilot with deep feelings. I want to save Mister Anthony's life. I want to make his life better. Writing about him won't do either, but I bow before him all the same.

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[Saeed Jones](#)

Saeed Jones is the author of *Prelude to Bruise*, *How We Fight for Our Lives*, and *Alive at the End of the World*. He recently edited *The People's Project* with Maggie Smith. His next book, *Home Out There*, is forthcoming from Washington Square Press.

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