

[← Back](#)

Delta music drives characters

By Kay O'Donnell February 13, 2005 Publication: San Antonio Express-News (TX)

Page: 7J Word Count: 558

The Celestial Jukebox By Cynthia Shearer Shoemaker & Hoard, \$25
Author Cynthia Shearer may not have grown up in the Delta, but she definitely can write about it. Not only does she vividly portray the nuances of this Southern lifestyle, but she does so on a small-town scale (a very small town, to be precise).

In her second novel, "The Celestial Jukebox," Shearer focuses on people, not plot. Though characters are linked, there is no obvious central story line at work. Instead, Shearer's characters intersect at various times, affecting each other's lives or actions and often revealing a little bit more about themselves in the process. The uniting force for many of these characters is the town of Madagascar, Miss., and, more specifically, the Celestial Grocery run by Chinese immigrant Angus Chien. If there is a main character in Shearer's book, it is Angus. He is one of the few fully developed characters - we know his past, his dreams, his failures. It is within the confines of Angus' store, "a tarpaper shack on stilts ... the kind of country store most casino tourists sped past without looking up," that the rhythmic, beating heart of Madagascar resides, in the form of a 1939 Rock-ola jukebox. The jukebox - which more often plays what it wants, not what was selected - helps to establish an elemental accompaniment to the book's overall structure, that of music. Blues, African folk songs, gospel - all have a place in Shearer's book, so much so that she includes a discography of featured tunes. Music is more than just a backdrop for the characters, it often serves as its own dialogue to express the feelings or emotions of the moment. Music is the driving force behind another central character, Boubacar. A recent arrival to America and Madagascar, the teenage Boubacar has left his family in Africa for a chance at a different life and with the desire to be "L'Amercain." It is through his eyes, however, that the failings and flaws of America are revealed. When Boubacar visits the town dump, he finds that "America was an empire of waste and refuse, stretching as far as his eyes

could reach.... The Americans had a machine for everything: to grill their hamburgers, to make their toast, to dry their hair, to blow the leaves out of their driveways. This was the final resting place of all the machines." Shearer populates her book with a wide cross-section of cultures and races - Chinese, African, black American, Hispanic - and though race issues do arise, there are few direct conflicts. Instead, Shearer focuses on showing successful relationships where race, though not ignored, does not define the association. This is best epitomized in the decades-long friendship between farmers Dean, who is white, and Aubrey, who is black. Dean first meets Aubrey as a boy, in 1971: "He was the sort of child made suspicious by anything that resembled normal kindness. Dean could read the boy like a book: he had not known much kindness." A final note: the first few chapters of the book may seem disjointed as Shearer takes time to introduce characters, often one chapter at a time. But like the rhythms of an old Son House song, the book soon finds its tempo. Kay O'Donnell is an instructor of journalism at Our Lady of the Lake University and a free-lance writer.

San Antonio Express-News (TX)**Date:** February 13, 2005**Page:** 7J

Copyright 2005 San Antonio Express-News