



MUSICAL FUTURE OF NEW ORLEANS UNCERTAIN

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In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, many wonder if the local music scene can return to what it once was in the Big Easy.

As Michael White returned to New Orleans to see what remained of his home, the jazz musician had to wear a mask because of the mold that grew after Hurricane Katrina flooded the city.

In his piano room, he had stored records, photos, sheet music and a vintage collection of clarinets -- effectively, a museum of New Orleans music -- now destroyed by water.

But like many other New Orleans musicians, White has moved away from the region that helped build and feed his love of music.

A history set to music

Founded by French colonialists, early New Orleans brought together many ethnic and cultural groups. Slaves from Africa and the Caribbean brought aspects of their cultures to New Orleans, while the French, and later Spanish, influences added to the city's diversity.

Later, when the United States bought Louisiana in 1803, many American blacks streamed into New Orleans, adding to the city's already eclectic mix of cultures.

As early as the 18th century, African drum and dance performances occurred each Sunday near a downtown market known as Congo Square.

Brass bands, all the rage in America by the 1890s, were spiced up in New Orleans, and soon ragtime piano and improvised, upbeat brass bands became popular.

In the early 20th century, New Orleans birthed such musical innovators as Jelly Roll Morton, the Creole Orchestra and the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. King Oliver and his protégé Louis Armstrong brought a significant influence to the music scene.

Will New Orleans have a second line?

But perhaps no event better typifies the passion and emotion of New Orleans music than the traditional jazz funeral.

In the early 1900s, organizations called mutual aid and benevolent societies were common among many ethnic groups in urban areas. Many of these organizations had a uniquely expressive approach to funerals.

On the way from the church to the cemetery, a marching band played dirges and hymns, but after the burial service, a raucous dancing celebration ensued, and the brass band let loose. Usually a "second line" procession followed with exuberant dancing.

These spiritual transformations from death to rebirth personified the determined, hopeful spirit of New Orleans and its music.

Before the storm, music pervaded life in New Orleans. At any dance, parade, fish fry or church festival, you could count on the presence of a standard New Orleans jazz band -- a cornet, clarinet and trombone.

A city devastated but hopeful

A recent party at a leading music club Tipitina's revealed the yearning among musicians who want to return home but are not sure they have a home to return to.

The Rebirth Brass Band played to a packed audience, but when the show was over, the musicians disbursed to cities like Atlanta, Baltimore and Houston, where they have been staying since Katrina.

Bill Taylor, who heads the Tipitina's Foundation, which offers aid to musicians displaced by Katrina, says it's hard to convince people to come back.

"What can we do to help give you some hope right now?" he said. "If we don't stand up and say, 'we're here, we're not going anywhere, then who would.'"

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin also wants the musicians back.

"We have transitioned from the rhythm and sounds of New Orleans being military helicopters, and, you know, Humvee vehicles, to now. The music is back. And when the music is back, New Orleans is alive," he said at a scaled-down version of the city's annual Voodoo Festival, a mix of rock and traditional New Orleans music.

New hope for homeless musicians

Meanwhile, singer Harry Connick Jr. and saxophone player Branford Marsalis are working with Habitat for Humanity, an organization dedicated to building houses for low-income families, to create a "village" for New Orleans musicians who lost their homes to Hurricane Katrina.

The New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity says it hasn't decided on a location yet, but \$2 million dollars has been raised.

Musician Michael White said he hopes New Orleans can use music to get past this period of sadness.

"I think one of the lessons of the jazz funeral for all these years is ... we have to be optimistic and say, we have transitioned into something else, but that something else is an opportunity for it to come back and be great," he said.

"Be proud. Look for the good part. Express the pain and sorrow through the music and keep going."

-- *Compiled by James Yolles for NewsHour Extra*

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