

# New Orleans Jazz Fest: A celebration of a city reborn

April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2007

By Edna Gundersen, USA TODAY

A year ago, a combination of can-do voodoo and the Category High-Five spirit of the community helped usher in the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival (April 27-29 and May 4-6). The feast of funky sounds and a joyous throng of 250,000 fans converged on the newly sod Fair Grounds barely eight months after Katrina drowned the city and sent many musicians fleeing.

Producer Quint Davis is heralding a second miracle as Jazz Fest's opening weekend launches today with a bill that boasts Van Morrison, Norah Jones, Jerry Lee Lewis, Brad Paisley, Ludacris and a host of hometown heroes, from Dr. John to Rockin' Dopsie Jr. to Terence Blanchard. For its May 4-6 closer, headliners include John Mayer, Steely Dan, ZZ Top, John Legend, Joss Stone, New Edition and George Benson.

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"We took a big leap into the unknown last year," Davis says. "Once we got going, we said, 'We're not just going to get back to where it was, we're going to take it further.' This is the most talent we've ever had, the deepest in all categories. We're hitting all cylinders."

That the 37-year-old institution is able to stage its richest smorgasbord a mere 20 months after a cataclysmic hurricane is testament to New Orleans' cultural vitality, Davis says.

"You can destroy our city, and that unique culture feeds us all the more," he says. "That's why Jazz Fest plays such a role in energizing people. It's a catalyst for rejuvenation. People feel a hunger to connect with these great performers."

From rock band Cowboy Mouth to the ReBirth Brass Band, regional regulars dominate, though this year Davis fattened the roster of A-list outsiders to compensate for the city's ongoing shortage of tour stopovers since flooding shut down three large theaters.

The city isn't short on live music. Though shuttered hotels and fewer conventions have hurt musicians, particularly jazz players, the club scene has bounced back full force, with more live venues per capita than any U.S. city.

"That's because music is not an accoutrement here," Davis says. "People are bonded to it. They live on it. It's food."

The 2006 fest crowd was 70% regional. Outsiders hesitated, Davis suspects, because they were uncertain clubs and restaurants were functioning and because media images of Katrina horrors scarred memories.

"They thought it was a tsunami, then Hiroshima," he says. "There are parts of New Orleans that are not OK. But the tourism infrastructure is fine. That's still a hard message to get across."

Last year's Jazz Fest drove that message home, says Sandy Shilstone, president of the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation.

"It was incredibly poignant, and the music was phenomenal," she says. "There is a true love for the authenticity of this city. Even people here who were blasé before are excited about Jazz Fest. We're all born-again New Orleanians."

Jazz Fest's spotlight shines not only on the city's musical history but also on a hotbed of modern and traditional talent, she says.

"We want people to come back to hear the sweet jazz of our modern-day legends," Shilstone says. "Everyone knows about Louis Armstrong, but it's also home to Irma Thomas, Irvin Mayfield and Kermit Ruffins. Music bubbles up from the streets here in every district. The clubs are vibrant, and New Orleans is open for business."

Katrina couldn't silence ReBirth Brass Band, the globe-trotting ensemble formed in 1983 by tuba player Philip Frazier and his brother, bass drummer Keith. The group initially dispersed, eventually landing in Houston.

Philip's Gentilly house suffered roof damage, and he returned four months after the storm. Most of the others lost their homes, including snare drummer Derrick Tabb, who rescued neighbors while weathering Katrina.

"They lost everything," says Frazier, 41. "But our will is strong. We had to come back to New Orleans to make sure this music doesn't die. Music was our healing process."

ReBirth enjoyed a bounty of post-Katrina invitations to perform around the world. When the group resumed its standing Tuesday night slot at the Maple Leaf club, Frazier detected a shift in the local vibe.

"People are more appreciative now," he says. "It's not just another musician you see every day. Nobody's taking us for granted."

With most clubs operating and much of the Crescent City talent pool still commuting from distant locales, jobs are plentiful.

But because the Ninth Ward and other neighborhoods remain ghost towns, "there are no more barbecues to play or backdoor gigs in the housing projects," he says. "I miss that."

The Ninth Ward looks like a war zone, but those people are trying hard to come back to homes they owned all their life. And you need those neighborhoods. That's where the music grows."

Musicians won't let the city's rich traditions fade "as long as we can keep youth involved and as long as more schools open," says Frazier, who started playing in fourth grade. "That's the future. People somewhere else can try to forget us, but we ain't going to let that happen."

Musicians helping musicians has been crucial to the cultural rebound, says music writer Ben Sandmel, longtime drummer and manager of the defunct Hackberry Ramblers.

"It's been a grass-roots effort," he says. "What impresses me is the tenacity and dedication of the musicians here, who are rebuilding their lives and their community on their own initiative."

Some rebuilt with aid from such area non-profits as Tipitina's Foundation, Sweet Home New Orleans and the New Orleans Musicians Hurricane Relief Fund. Others commute from Baton Rouge or greater distances. Several stayed away. The Neville Brothers gave up a lifelong N'awlins address. Aaron Neville settled in Nashville; brother Cyril still plays in New Orleans but lives in Austin.

"Many musicians are re-established, others are still reeling," Sandmel says. "The recovery is uneven, and a lot depends on whether people get an insurance settlement. In spite of how bad things are, there's an indomitable spirit."

"I read a couple of articles about the death of New Orleans culture, and that what's left is Disneyland. Those statements are baffling. You can't say the music community's roots have been cut off. There's too much energy, and it's completely genuine and not contrived for tourists. These traditions are as essential as breathing."

Housing has been a daunting impediment to music's resurgence. Katrina destroyed or damaged about 200,000 homes. The population, at about half its pre-Katrina level of 485,000, is expected to reach about 272,000 in mid-2008, according to the Rand Corp.

A recent Mount Auburn Associates study commissioned by Louisiana Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu estimates that close to two-thirds of the city's musicians have returned. They face higher rents and mortgages and insurance rates that have climbed 500%. *The WallStreet Journal* reports that the cost to build a new two-bedroom apartment is \$150,000, up 30% since Katrina, yet the median income is \$37,000, 21% below the national average.

"Affordable housing is hard to come by," says Jan Ramsey, publisher and editor of the Louisiana music magazine *OffBeat*. "It was always relatively inexpensive to live in New Orleans, which is why it drew so many artists, writers and musicians. Musicians are drifting back anyway, because they're so connected to the city."

*OffBeat* has tracked the diaspora, celebrating homecomings: Marva Wright back from Maryland, Davell Crawford from Atlanta, the Iguanas from Austin. Jazz trumpeter Ruffins returned from Houston and wed publicly at the recent French Quarter Festival. R&B queen Thomas lost her Lion's Den club, but is repairing her home.

"It's a big, incestuous family," Ramsey says of the music scene. "Everyone knows what everyone's doing, and people take care of each other. You don't find that in a lot of cities. It's heartwarming, and it got people back on their feet, because they quickly learned they couldn't depend on their government. Organizations kicked in to find gigs, pay for gigs, get instruments, finance CDs, a lot of good stuff."

Clarence "Frogman" Henry, playing Jazz Fest on Sunday, reaped the benefits of his lifelong membership in the New Orleans music club when colleagues and local charities rushed in to help him rebuild.

"The music community is strong because entertainers have stuck together," says Henry, 70. "The house is back real nice, not quite what it was, but I recovered pretty good. And I've been working more, even though I'm supposed to be retired."

Best known for his 1956 hit *Ain't Got No Home*, Henry is dismayed by escalating housing prices and the slow progress toward salvaging the Ninth Ward and other demolished neighborhoods. Yet he's optimistic about the city's cultural vitality.

"We are bouncing back," he says. "Musicians scattered, and some say they don't want to come back. But they will. I traveled all over and fell in love with Sweden and New Zealand, but there's only one New Orleans. You find disasters everywhere: floods, tornadoes — heck, people get stuck in snow. You can't run from Mother Nature.

"But Mother Nature isn't as strong as the music of New Orleans."

**JAZZED FOR JAZZ FEST: Do you plan to attend? Who are you most excited to see? Tell us below.**