

The Rhythms of the Crescent City

New Orleans Music

Civic pride aside, it's no exaggeration to state that New Orleans and South Louisiana constitute one of the world's great musical regions. Music is literally in the air, at street parades, jazz funerals, and an endless succession of festivals, both large and small. It's on the air, too, on fine local radio stations like WYAT, WWOZ and WTUL.

The Crescent City is best known for jazz, which made some of its most crucial evolutionary leaps here--thanks to pioneers like Buddy Bolden, King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Jellyroll Morton and Sidney Bechet. Traditional jazz remains healthy today, several generations later, nurtured at venues such as Preservation Hall and the Palm Court Jazz Cafe, by cultural activist musicians like Danny Barker, the Humphrey Brothers and Dr. Michael White. It's receiving radical creative input, moreover, from brass bands like the Dirty Dozen and ReBirth, who can be heard at such neighborhood clubs as the Glass House or the Petroleum Lounge. New Orleans also boasts fine modern jazz players like Red Tyler and Clarence Ford. Then there's the avant-garde--including Edward "Kidd" Jordan, David Torkanowski and Ramsey McLean--many who perform at Snug Harbor and Cafe Brasil. Ellis Marsalis has come back home to a prestigious professorial post at the University of New Orleans, while his sons Wynton, Branford and Delfeayo are enjoying well-deserved major success--as is jazz-based singing pianist Harry Connick, Jr.

Rhythm and blues became an art form in New Orleans some forty years ago, when hometown heroes like Fats Domino topped the national charts. The "Fat Man's" sound, masterminded by his bandleader Dave Bartholomew, was so infectious that major record companies sent their stars to record here, including hitmakers like Big Joe Turner and the irrepressible Little Richard. Another local luminary was the late Professor Longhair, whose Afro-Cuban rhumba style underscores New Orleans' connections with Caribbean culture. Those connections are also evidenced by the costumes, chants and drumbeats of the Mardi Gras Indians.

Today the rhythm & blues scene is still flourishing; many '50s stars can still be heard in peak form, including Irma Thomas, Frankie Ford and Clarence "Frogman" Henry. The Neville Brothers, Dr. John and expatriate Louisianian Marcia Ball have taken New Orleans R&B into the '90s, and off to the ears of the world. Such success has paved the way for other great R&B artists like Johnny Adams, Walter "Wolfman" Washington and Snooks Eaglin. Fine R&B haunts include Tipitina's, the Maple Leaf and Muddy Waters--and remember, this is not a town which frowns on dancing.

Rock and roll is doing fine in New Orleans, too, thanks to the Radiators, Dash Rip Rock, the House Levelers and a host of other hot bands; besides the above-mentioned R&B circuit, they can be heard at jumping joints like Jimmy's, Carrollton Station, Mid-City Bowling Lanes and the Rivershack Tavern. Cajun music and its black Creole counterpart, zydeco, are an especially unique factor in the local scene. This is serious dance music, make no mistake, and you can cut the rug in town at restaurant/nightclubs like Mulate's and Michaul's. For the complete Cajun/zydeco cultural experience, drive west a couple of hours to Slim's Y-Ki-Ki in Opelousas, Richard's in Lawtell or Bourque's in Lewisburg.

New Orleans also has a thriving Latin music scene, led by Ruben "Mr. Salsa" Gonzales, Hector Gallardo, Ritmo Caribeno, and the Iguanas. Wherever you go, for whatever type of music, remember that the Big Easy's nightclubs have no mandatory closing time, and informal dress is just fine. If you want to catch all our musical riches at once, don't miss the annual New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival held in late April and early May.

For all the latest listings, check out Wavelength and Offbeat magazines and the Times-Picayune's Lagniappe section which comes out on Fridays. The wealth of exciting options will leave you amazed, maybe even a bit frustrated. But you'll certainly understand why a British music journalist so aptly called South Louisiana's music scene "an embarassment of riches."

This article was specially written by Ben Sandmel, a New Orleans-based drummer, journalist and folklore researcher. The material may not be reproduced without permission from the Greater New Orleans Tourist & Convention Commission's Public Relations Department, and full credit must be given to the author. 4/91