

Still kicking brass

After Katrina, New Orleans musicians are marching on

By Todd R. Brown
STAFF WRITER

A CROWD gathers on a Sunday evening in the yard behind St. Augustine's Catholic Church in the Tremé area of New Orleans, a couple blocks from the French Quarter. A tuba sounds a rumbling bass line, then a snare drum rat-a-tats a stutter-step beat that weaves into a bass drum's funky hip-hop rhythm. Then trumpets, trombone and a saxophone join in with a jubilant cry, and the ensemble heads out onto Tremé Street.

The band draws the listeners into the street, forming a second line behind the musicians as they march through the neighborhood. The residents of Tremé, many black and poor but far from humbled by their circumstance, emerge with broad smiles from their dilapidated shotgun homes, some joining the dancers in the parade. The entourage makes its way up Ursulines Avenue to Joe's Cozy Corner, a neighborhood bar where the ReBirth Brass Band plays into the wee hours for its ecstatic fans.

Hurricane Katrina has changed all that.

"I lost everything, including my drum. I mean I have nothing except the clothes on my back. I just grabbed the family and walked right out the door," says Keith Frazier, bass drummer for ReBirth.

Now staying in Dallas, Frazier says he's used to being away from home: "Most of our jobs are out of town anyway."

The band, which played in July at the North Beach Jazz Festival, chose to continue with its planned fall tour, which began a week after the evacuation. Re-Birth returns to San Francisco for a concert Thursday at the Independent.

ReBirth, which formed in 1983 at Clark Senior High School in Tremé, revolutionized New Orleans brass bands by infusing traditional repertoire with funk, R&B and hip-hop and inspiring younger players to take up a contemporary style.

On ReBirth's recent album "Hot Venom" on Mardis Gras Records, the band collaborated with Soulja Slim, who had the No. 1 hit "Slow Motion" with fellow New Orleanian rapper Juvenile. The band has even recorded with bluegrass musicians from North Carolina.

"African-Americans, they have been able to take from the old to create the new," says Bill Summers, percussionist with the Headhunters and Los Hombres Calientes.

Summers, who evacuated to Atlanta,



FEEL LIKE FUNKIN' IT UP: Based in New Orleans, the ReBirth Brass Band is continuing its concert tour but looking forward to going back to the city to be part of recovery efforts and the town's continuing musical legacy.

If you go

- **Bonerama**
 - **When:** 9:30 p.m. today
 - **Where:** Boom Boom Room, 1601 Fillmore St., San Francisco
 - **Tickets:** \$12
 - **Contact:** (415) 673-8000
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- **ReBirth Brass Band**
 - **When:** 9 p.m. Thursday
 - **Where:** The Independent, 628 Divisadero St., San Francisco
 - **Tickets:** \$20
 - **Contact:** (415) 771-1421

co-produced this year's album "Rebelution" by New Orleans brass band the Soul Rebels, who took their cue from ReBirth in the early '90s and switched from playing "trad" songs to creating acoustic hip-hop.

"Who wants to stay in the same spot and play the same thing forever?" Summers says.

Music in New Orleans doesn't stand still. It has survived slavery, segregation and deep, lasting poverty, preserving ancient traditions and leading to radical aesthetic innovations.

From the early 1700s until the 1870s, slaves and their descendants gathered in Congo Square, next to the French Quarter, and played Wolof, Fula, Congolese and other varieties of African music that long had been outlawed elsewhere in the country. Eventually the performers transferred their musical sense to European instruments and the tom drums of the American Indians.

After the Civil War, Creoles — Louisianans of mixed European and African ancestry — took up Confederate marching-band instruments and formed their own brass bands, with a Caribbean twist. The hybrid, danceable rhythm of those bands was a key ingredient of jazz, which evolved into rock, fusion and almost every other style of black American music in the 20th century. And it continues to change and advance in the city of its birth.

"It's going to be interesting to see how the music occurs after Katrina," says Alvin Batiste, a longtime clarinetist now staying in Baton Rouge, La. Batiste teaches music at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, where Branford and Wynton Marsalis studied and their father, Ellis, taught.

Batiste, who says he's seen "three or four generations" of the city's musicians come into their own, says, "New Orleans is a living culture. If you're in New Orleans on a weekend, you can go to at least 10 or 11 clubs where live music is being played."

"The cultural quality of New Orleans is like no other in any state of the union — its own music, its own food, its own dance, its own everything — it's a country almost by itself," Summers says. "And those traditions are extremely important to American culture as a whole. A lot of New Orleanians are going to see more work than they ever have."

He says the displacement caused by Katrina gives New Orleans artists an opportunity to share the city's unique music and dance with new audiences in Houston, Dallas, Atlanta and elsewhere.

So far that's been the case: ReBirth played a sold-out Pay-Per-View Katrina benefit on Tuesday at Madison Square Garden, along with founding ReBirth

member and Tremé Brass Band trumpeter Kermit Ruffins, New Birth Brass Band alum Troy "Trombone Shorty" Andrews, the Dirty Dozen Brass Band and other Crescent City stars.

Tonight, Bonerama, a trombone supergroup featuring members of Harry Connick Jr.'s band and the New Orleans Nightcrawlers brass band, plays the Boom Boom Room in San Francisco.

Meanwhile, the San Francisco Entertainment Commission plans to bring 100 displaced artists from New Orleans to the city, among them Dirty Dozen founding member and tuba player Kirk Joseph and Soul Rebels trumpeter and solo artist Kid Merv.

"I think the music is more valuable than ever," says Lumar LeBlanc, tuba player for the Soul Rebels, now in Houston. "Having the stamp of New Orleans on it, it's like the last bit of culture that hasn't been washed away by the storm."

He adds, "I'm eager to get back and do my thing."

Phil Frazier, ReBirth's tuba player and a founding member, also vows to return. "It's too much culture, too much heritage — I can't turn my back on my city, what was passed on to me," he says. "It's my turn now; somebody got to help preserve it. We don't want it to never die."

You don't have to second line through Tremé to feel the spirit of brass-band music. The community of New Orleans artists and their fans stretches farther than the confines of the city. Now more than ever, the legacy of Congo Square is everywhere.

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