

**JAZZ VESPERS**  
**A FUNDRAISER FOR NEW ORLEANS MUSICIANS**

Offered by Christina Honchell

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My cousin John started running away from home when he was ten. About the same time he picked up a guitar. None of the grownups in our family seemed all that concerned: how much trouble could a boy get into in the farm country around Rochester, NY? It was gloriously rebellious to me: I hadn't yet mustered the nerve to stay out after dark. When John and I were thirteen, I spent some summer weeks at John's house, and was thrilled that he would let me play my Cream records on his record player – but he would follow them up with the strangest records from his collection – blues without the British veneer. John had discovered a Knoxville, Tennessee radio station that he could pull in late at night, on which he could listen to the real thing, Mississippi delta blues. He ran away for good at fifteen, playing blues around Rochester on his National Steel, playing the songs of Son House and Robert Johnson. Now as fate would have it, Eddie James "Son" House lived in Rochester at that time, and folks who noticed how much John played like him brought the two of them together. At first, John was in too much awe to do anything more than tune the great man's guitars, but by the time John turned sixteen, they were gigging together regularly and hanging out on House's porch. House's wife, Evie, being a good Christian woman, wouldn't allow blues to be played inside her home, so they hung out on the porch, wailed the blues and talked about Jesus, and when winter came they would play spirituals inside. A year later John would leave Rochester on a search for musical holy ground that would end in New Orleans, where he ended up playing with Professor Longhair, Dr. John, various Neville

Brothers and George Porter. The lure of the Crescent City had its hold on him, adding New Orleans mambo and second line rhythms to his slide and bottleneck, howling, wicked blues repertoire.

John lives most of the time in Florida now – New Orleans can be a dangerous place for a man with addictions – but he continued to play often enough in New Orleans to keep a lot of his instruments there, in a little house in the Ninth Ward. All gone now. In the grand scheme of things, not such a huge loss, but to a musician, it's devastating. And devastating that his friends and bandmates are scattered, most in exile in Lafayette, and that an amazingly close and supportive community has been shattered.

In the wake of Katrina, we heard many attempts to say why New Orleans was special. In a lovely little book, *Feet on the Street*, which came out this past spring, Roy Blount Jr. says that New Orleans is no less than the cradle of American culture:

“It's where Walt Whitman first tasted sin, where Abraham Lincoln got his first full sense of the scope and the primary shame of the nation, where Mark Twain began and ended his riverboat career and started imagining the books he would write, where Buddy Bolden and Bunk Johnson and Jelly Roll Morton became the first legends of jazz and Louis Armstrong put the “A” in American music, where WC Handy dreaded seeing that evening sun go down, where William Faulkner turned from poetry to fiction (and shot BBs at nuns from his garret window), where Huey Long went to Law School, and where Tennessee Williams acquired his “Tennessee” and lost (or so he said) his virginity.”

Blount goes on and on – the names and the stories are endless. My family history contains stories of my grandfather's visits in the 20s to hear the hot music, and the night that my father spent on a bar stool next to Little

Richard and brought me home a note from him – one of my most prized possessions.

New Orleans is a big mixed up multicultural stew, Spanish, African, French, Choctaw, Anglo, Creole, Latino. Always has been. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries there wasn't a more terrifying place for Africans brought to America: the slave markets of New Orleans tell a horrifying, shameful story. And yet it was in the city square where slaves gathered on Sunday nights to chant, dance, play drums, sing; and in the bayous and country roads of the Gulf Coast where free black men and women struggled in the face of unspeakable oppression, that our great American art form was born. As popular and as mainstream as jazz and blues may become, Cornel West reminds us that “We should never forget that the blues was born out of the crucible of slavery and its vicious legacy, that it expresses the determination of a people to assert their human value. The blues professes to the deep psychic and material pains inflicted on black people within the sphere of a mythological American land of opportunity.”

Did we all know how little had changed for the poor of Louisiana before the Katrina coverage made us face this American disgrace? How have we let the leadership of this country demonize cities and the poor who live in them, decimate schools, create trade policies which eliminated factory jobs and destroy the social safety nets for the poor and the working class, all the while cutting the taxes of those who have moved to suburbs and exurbs and gated communities? Are we paranoid to think that there are many in power who are not unhappy to see the poor of New Orleans scattered, unable to organize, unable to reclaim their homes and to keep New Orleans from being rebuilt as a tourist-friendly, giant City Walk? One of the first post Katrina responses from the administration in Washington was to

suspend the Davis-Bacon Act, the act which requires payment of prevailing wages. This is not only leadership without vision, but it is cruel and punitive toward the working people who have already suffered so much.

I cannot imagine an America without jazz or an America without New Orleans. If that city hadn't grown up in that swampy basin, we might be celebrating polka vespers tonight. There would never have been an Elvis, a Rolling Stone or a White Stripe. Country music without the blues would be insufferable. I'm not sure what it means to be patriotic, but I experience deep love for this country when I hear our indigenous music. There's nothing peculiarly American about loving jazz - they love jazz in Germany, in Japan – they just don't make it like we do. It's our painful, joyous national narrative. In my perfect world, Louis Armstrong would be on our flag. We'd sing a little Duke Ellington before the ball game. Great American music has taught me to love America.

And that's why New Orleans is holy ground. The best thing about America came from there. It's holy ground because women and men died there, are suffering there and will suffer for years to come. Bringing back the parades will do nothing to change that. Pouring relief money into the area will do nothing to change that. God demands so much more of us.

During our recent vacation in New York City, where with all apologies to Tony Bennett, I always leave my heart, we made a pilgrimage to Hyde Park: to walk the holy ground where Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt raised their family, stroll the long stretch of gravel driveway where FDR walked on his crutches every day, pay homage at the tombs of these two great American saints. And I was moved to tears by films of this great president who told us to reject fear, who boldly created a safety net for working men and women at a time when no one else in leadership thought it

possible. And moved to rage at those in power today who have made their agenda the systematic dismantling of that new deal. We need Roosevelt's audacity today, and we must demand it from those we put in leadership. Or the tragedy of New Orleans will have been for naught, and God's heart will break and break.

May the One who makes peace in the high heavens make peace upon us and upon all who dwell on Earth, and let us say Amen.