

New Orleans awash in music 10 years after Katrina

A decade after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has made a successful comeback as the home of jazz with a boom in tourism.



File photo of Louisiana struck by the disaster in 2005, that killed 1,800 people

New Orleans

The vibrant sounds of brass bands and buskers echo through the streets of New Orleans ten years after the birthplace of jazz was devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

But while tourists may find themselves overwhelmed by choice, locals fear some of the Big Easy's spirit of creativity and improvisation may have been lost to the floodwaters.

"There had been a long line of older musicians passing a culture on to younger musicians," guitarist Jonathan Frelich told AFP.

"That got uprooted, and the way the city decided to invest in culture didn't have much to do with the way that it had existed before."

The loss of neighborhood clubs and an increased emphasis on tourism has shaped the opportunities for musicians and the types of music they play, he said.

"It became the mode of desperation, and the only game in town," Frelich said.

More than 1,800 people were killed across the US Gulf Coast -- the vast majority in New Orleans -- and over a million people were displaced when the Category 5 hurricane struck on August 29, 2005. The financial toll topped \$150 billion.

Katrina flooded 80 percent of New Orleans with water that rose as high as 20 feet (six meters) after the coastal city's poorly built levee system burst from the pressure of a massive storm surge.

The city descended into chaos as increasingly desperate people with little food or clean water waited days for help to arrive. It was months before the Big Easy was habitable again and over 100,000 people still have not returned to their homes.

When the waters receded, the future looked bleak. City leaders embraced the efforts of the tourism industry to package local culture as a catalyst of the recovery.

- 'Mixing it up' -

It worked. The economy is booming, a whopping nine million tourists visited last year, and there are scores of new festivals and venues offering work to local musicians.

But the cost of living has risen sharply as the city still works to rebuild its decimated housing stock. Many musicians find themselves struggling to get by with the cost of renting or owning a home up 30 to 45 percent from pre-storm levels.

Plenty of performers find themselves working for tips in the street or even in some of the bars serving tourists. Those who manage to get regular paying gigs find that their work isn't always valued.

"Some of the newer places aren't as concerned with the quality of music because there's so many people on the street, they're going to get bodies no matter what," said Meschiya Lake, a popular jazz singer who performs regularly on the bustling Frenchmen Street.

In recent years, Frenchmen Street has transformed from the hipper alternative to Bourbon Street into a more tourist-friendly destination, where a well-lit outdoor market and a giant gourmet hot dog stand welcome visitors.

Once known for its diverse, experimental vibe, the strip is



now home to more cover bands and traditional jazz.

While the hotels and bars catering to tourists may be quite tame, musicians still have places to cut loose.

Many, though certainly not all, of the corner bars which helped make New Orleans an early hotbed of rhythm and blues, rock and funk have reopened. The social clubs that support the brass band led neighborhood parades known as "second lines" have also reformed.

"New Orleans music always sells, and musicians are skilled at meeting their audience's expectations," said Matt Sakakeeny, a musicologist at Tulane University who specializes in New Orleans brass bands.

"The system still rewards innovative musicians who know the formula and are mixing it up. I don't see any signs that they are in danger."

-- 'Vibrancy, accidental magic' --

Musicians said that while tourism had a homogenizing effect on the music, the city's changing demographics pose another threat to its penchant for improvisation.

The black population has fallen by about 115,000 people, dropping from 68 percent of residents in 2000 to 60 percent in 2013, the latest census figures show.

Plenty of white residents also found the emotional and financial cost of rebuilding to be too high, though their numbers are harder to measure.

The post-Katrina influx of new residents included homeowners who were less inclined to join street parades, and more willing to call the authorities.

Recently proposed legislation to limit the volume of recorded and live music puzzled many locals accustomed to the late night blasts of trumpets.

"That's part of the vibrancy, that accidental magic," Lake told AFP. "It's like going to France and telling them to stop speaking French."

Tuba player Bennie Pete longs for pre-storm New Orleans.

"You always feel like you're missing something," he said.

"You're driving through a neighborhood looking for a certain house, and it's not there... the heart of it is what I'm looking for."

That's why it's so important to make sure that the city's unique culture and sound is protected, he said.

"We understand our position as musicians and culture bearers is to educate the younger ones so they can grab the torch," he said. "Right now, we still have a lot more walking and torch carrying to do."



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