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JAZZ: A HOMING SIGNAL FOR NEW ORLEANS

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Sometimes music speaks to your soul. The melody and vibrations, when you hear them, make everything sweeter. You close your eyes and a smile comes to your face. You feel good.

That's how it is when I hear jazz music. The delicious strains of jazz can make me stop in my tracks, listen, tap my foot and go on about my day in a happier mood. On Saturdays, when I clean house and do chores, I put selections on the stereo from jazz greats like Louis Armstrong to make the day's tasks a little more pleasant. Even ironing doesn't seem so bad when it's done to "What a Wonderful World."

But every now and then I get lonesome for the real thing; a real jazz band, a live performance. I feel the urge to tap my foot on the wooden floor of a jazz hall, not while dusting the dining room table. That's when I get out the suitcase and head to New Orleans. For others, the city offers fantastic food, architecture, atmosphere and revelry, but for me, it offers music.

Flights from Bloomington to New Orleans are fairly cheap these days. So I hopped on a plane Saturday morning and by noon was in the birthplace of jazz, the hometown of Louis Armstrong and Wynton Marsalis. I planned to spend two days soaking up enough music to last me through several more sessions of vacuuming and scrubbing the bathtub.

It's been a while since my last visit to Crescent City and, to me, it had changed a little. Maybe I'm just getting older. The French Quarter's Bourbon Street at night has always been the venue for pursuing decadence, but I didn't remember quite so much willingness. It's still jam packed with people wandering aimlessly between jazz bars, strip joints and souvenir shops. But I didn't remember the frequent flashing of nudity. It used to be limited to Mardi Gras, but now it's a nightly occurrence.

Display your best attributes and the crowd will reward you by showering you with strings of beads. It's unbelievable what people will do just to be tossed cheap plastic jewelry. Had the prize been a string of real diamonds, I might have changed my tune, but as it was I skipped the beads and bare bodies to make my way to three favorite establishments - Preservation Hall, Palm Court Jazz Cafe and Maison Bourbon. The French Quarter, despite its T-shirt shops and littered Hurricane cups, is still a romantic spot at night. Darkness hides the grunginess of the day and gas lanterns light the streets. Horse-drawn carriages make their way down cobble streets. And standing on one corner, you can hear several different bands playing at once. The question is: Where to start?

Preservation Hall is jazz's "cultural landmark." It's where you find the jazz of the 1920s, the music that made New Orleans famous. Local favorites, and sometimes the world renowned, play nightly here. You sit on wooden benches in a rustic setting. No drinks are served, so it's BYOB. You go for the music, not for comfort.

Down the street is Maison Bourbon. Years ago, I listened to Wallace Davenport play the trumpet here. Davenport, who was in his 70s when I last saw him, used to play with the Count Basie and Lionel Hampton bands. Later, he formed his own band and drew packed houses during a solo career that spanned four generations.

It was obvious that Davenport's knees were giving him trouble when I saw him in 1996. He had to be helped on stage and then took a seat at the center of his court. But, man, could he still play. His recording of "Ain't Misbehavin'" is one of my Saturday morning favorites. When I walked into Maison Bourbon last week, I didn't know if I'd see Davenport. "Where's Wallace?" I asked the manager.

"He doesn't play here anymore. His knees, you know?"
Maison Bourbon is not a large place. Small, round, cafe-style tables are packed in and you frequently rub elbows and knees with your neighbors. Seated with us that night were three couples from Barbados. Entryways to the corner bar are wide open and people from the street usually stand in the doorways to listen.

There's no cover charge, but a minimum of one drink must be purchased during each set. We ordered two Diet Cokes for \$11, a fee we gladly paid to hear the music.

On the wall above the bar is a painting of a jazz parade coming down Bourbon Street, right after a Louisiana rain, to a spot in front of that very establishment. The rest of the room is decorated with portraits of famous musicians who have performed there. On stage this night was a face I didn't recognize, but one I am sure is on its way to fame.

A young man by the name of Jamil Sharif, still in his 20s, was wailing an old-time jazz tune on his trumpet. That's the best thing about Maison Bourbon. You don't hear the "hard bop" of the 1990s, but rather smooth, traditional jazz. Jamil was putting his own spin on "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?" Yes, I do, I thought.

It turns out that Jamil is from a very musical family. His father, Umar Sharif, is a veteran trumpeter on Broadway and a member of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. His cousins are Willie and Percy Humphrey, cornerstones of Preservation Hall Jazz Bands. And his great-grandfather was the legendary New Orleans music teacher, Professor J.B. Humphrey.

Having played back up to Tony Bennett and Ella Fitzgerald, Jamil knows the standard pop tunes, but he's dedicated, he says, to traditional jazz.

"I want to keep the traditional jazz flowing but take a little of this and a little of that and mold it into one thing of my own," he says. "When people come to New Orleans, they want to hear traditional jazz. The first place they run to is Preservation Hall to see some of the old guys, but they also want to hear some younger players."

Even though he is young, Jamil and his band were playing old familiar tunes, like "Ain't She Sweet," "On the Sunny Side of the Street," and "Dark Town Strutter's Ball." Pretty soon, we were clapping, tapping and singing to our hearts' content. It was great, and exactly why I came.

During a break, we spoke with the members of the band. "You're from Illinois?," said the drummer. "Chicago is a great jazz city. But you know, once you've heard the jazz in New Orleans, you've got to come back. You always come back."

"You're right," I said. Ain't it sweet.

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