

The Last Brass Band?

Musical Mentorship and Social Justice Organizing

by Bruce Sunpie Barnes and Rachel Breunlin

In 1958, Folkways Records released [*The Music of the Eureka Brass Band*](#). Producer Samuel Charters wrote in the liner notes, “The aim of this group of recordings . . . was to find and preserve as much of the cities [sic] musical tradition as possible.” Concentrating on the Eureka was important, he said, because it was the “last band carrying on the traditions of the older bands.” Charters was not alone in his concern. The possibility that the music could be lost to attrition, neglect, or new styles has been an ongoing concern for every generation since the creation of jazz in New Orleans.

With the release of the album, Folkways became part of a wide network of educational, governmental, and community-based organizations and grassroots efforts that have evolved in New Orleans to “preserve” jazz. Over the last three years, we have documented many of them through a collaborative ethnography, [*Talk That Music Talk: Passing On Brass Band Music in New Orleans the Traditional Way*](#). This project was part of another effort by the federal government that began in 2006 when one of us, Bruce Sunpie Barnes, started the Music for All Ages program at the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park. As an interpretive park ranger, he invited brass bands well versed in the traditional repertoire, such as the Treme and the New Wave, to teach young people to play music by ear. In 2012, we teamed up to document how the program was connected to different lineages of music preservation and education in the city.

One of our most compelling findings has been the interaction between musical recordings, grassroots organizing, and musical mentorship programs formed by musicians and civil rights organizations. In this article, we share some of the ethnography from our project on social justice organizing to better understand how these different efforts are connected.

Dryades Street, 1950s and early 1960s

The power of place is important in understanding music in New Orleans—not broad sketches of areas of the city, but the specific places where music happens and how it is connected to the rest of life. *[The Music of the Eureka Brass Band](#)* was recorded at Maggie Tappin’s Meeting Hall at 1719 Dryades Street in Central City. Charters explains that the hall is on the “main street of a Negro shopping district. The sousaphone player, Red Clark, lives next door, and the first trumpet, Willie Pajeaud, lives around the corner.” Musicians in New Orleans grew up in a city where the lines of racial segregation were drawn strictly around places of business and worship, but the neighborhoods themselves were mixed. The leader of the Young Tuxedo Brass Band, Gregg Stafford (who also plays trumpet with the Liberty in the new Smithsonian Folkways release *[Through the Streets of the City](#)*), was just a little boy in the 1950s. He grew up a couple of blocks from where the *[Eureka recordings](#)* took place. He explained:

My story starts where I was raised up in New Orleans on Second and Freret. A lot of black families from the plantations on River Road and south of New Orleans moved to this part of the city. Many of the men worked on the riverfront, and many others played music. . . . The 2400 block was full of black children like myself, and the 2300 block that intersected our street was highly populated with white kids. We played football, shot marbles, and rode our bikes together. But, according to the institutions, when it was time to go to school, we went one way, and they went another.

Dryades Street was a black shopping district with white-owned businesses that had discriminatory hiring practices. Some of the first civil rights boycotts began on this street. Jerome Smith, one of the cofounders of the New Orleans chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), described who was involved:

The Consumer’s League of Greater New Orleans, organized by Reverend Avery Alexander, A.L. Davis, and Henry Mitchell, was boycotting the businesses in front of a grocery store that, although the majority of the clientele was black, didn’t have blacks working on the cash register or in management. I went and joined the line. I didn’t know what my place was, but I didn’t have to define it before I made a contribution.

In the early 1960s, young activists like Smith organized a CORE chapter at the YMCA on Dryades Street and used nonviolent, direct action to challenge the entrenched segregation around the city and throughout the South. At a time when they were being

arrested and beaten for organizing, black brass bands in New Orleans were also leading all kinds of parades through the city. The power of the music to create a route for young people became an important organizing.

Stafford learned to play brass band music by joining the E. Gibson Brass Band. In college, he joined legendary jazz musician and raconteur Danny Barker's "grassroots self help project," the Fairview Baptist Church Christian Band, that was designed to teach young people how to play traditional music. He remembers Barker bringing in records by the Tuxedo and [Eureka](#) brass bands to rehearsals:

He'd say, "If you don't know the song, just listen. And when you feel like you can play it, play." On the Eureka Brass Band's version of "Joe Avery's Blues," George "Kid Shiek" Colar played a lot of blue notes, then he'd lay out and come back in with something else.

Through studying records and playing music with these older musicians, Stafford was able to incorporate different styles into his own playing and joined the Young Tuxedo Brass Band for Tambourine and Fan's Bucketmen parade.

Tambourine and Fan, 1970s

In the early 1970s, Jerome Smith and fellow CORE organizer Rudy Lombard had returned to New Orleans to establish the Tambourine and Fan club. Smith said:

I wanted to create an organization out of children's play and civil rights—use their fun time for social awareness and historical linkages, especially to the music. I wanted the organization to create things that would electrify their senses—electrify their spirits.

Young kids from the downtown neighborhoods of the Sixth and Seventh wards came to after-school and summer programs. Cayetano Hingle, the leader of the New Birth Brass Band and bass drummer for the Liberty Brass Band in [Through the Streets of the City](#), learned to play the drums at Tambourine and Fan. The organization connected the summer camp to [Congo Square](#), a part of the City Commons where enslaved Africans were able to gather on Sundays to have a market and play music during the 1800s:

When the bass drum started beating, every kid in the camp knew one thing: you need to line up and get into "Congo Square." Everyone wanted to play the bass

drum, and it looked like it was Kerry Hunter and me who were the first ones to the drums every time. We were playing the special beat while the other kids sang:

*The tambourine was born down in New Orleans,
In the little field they called Congo Square.
The tambourine was heard by Louis and Celestin,
My sister **Mahalia**, the world's gospel queen.
We honor the day of **Martin Luther King**,
And if it wasn't for the struggle, the tambourine wouldn't ring.*

The fusion of social protest and music was an important component of Tambourine and Fan. As the group worked with children, many of the adults in the organization faced ongoing issues with police brutality. When Smith's brother and a friend were beaten so badly that their friend died of complications from his injuries, they had an impromptu parade after the funeral as a memorial and a protest. From this event, they decided to form a social and pleasure club called the Bucketmen. Smith explained:

We saw the parade as a moving classroom. As a club, we were dedicated to having all the great brass bands in the city like the Onward, Tuxedo, and Olympia, but we also wanted the kids to play as well.

The Junior Olympia, 1980s

Kenneth Terry, the lead trumpet player of the **Treme Brass Band** in the Smithsonian's recordings, plays blues and gospel like **Louis Armstrong**. He also helped to create the modern brass band sound made famous by bands like the Rebirth and New Birth brass bands. He grew up with Tambourine and Fan as well:

They used to teach us how to dance to the Olympia Brass Band album. You'd have forty boys and forty girls learning to second line. Danny Barker had just left the Fairview, and he taught the Roots of Jazz at Hunter's Field. I'd see these guys coming with old beat-up instruments. Danny came with a little banjo.

The Bucketmen parade became an important place for the young musicians to learn how to play the music. They paraded downtown all the way to Central City where the CORE organizers used to meet at a barroom called Big Time Crip. Known for its all-jazz juke box, the bar hosted many Sunday afternoon second line parades, and witnessed the transformation of brass bands along the way.

Tambourine and Fan developed a special relationship with the Olympia Brass Band, which was formed in the late 1950s by Harold “Duke” Dejan, an alto saxophone player who had played with the [Original Eureka Brass Band](#). He branched out on his own to form the Eureka Number Two and soon renamed the band Dejan’s Olympia Brass Band. Smith explained what happened next in the mid-1980s:

Milton Batiste and Harold Dejan formed the Junior Olympia. They were our library to teach the kids about traditional jazz. The Olympia also did a lot to help us financially. They played gigs for us and didn’t take the money, or they’d get the gig, and give us the money they were paid.

Batiste showed Terry, Hingle, and many other musicians how to play traditional jazz and recorded an album with them. In the liner notes he wrote, “The young men on this recording have set a goal in life: To take over the New Orleans music tradition.”

Nearly thirty years later, these musicians are known for bridging the traditional musical repertoire with the innovations of their own generations. Batiste’s influence on Terry’s style is undeniable in his stance—the way he throws his trumpet into the air and plays with one hand, and in the way he has become an important teacher for a wide network of young musicians.

The New Orleans Young Traditional Brass Band, 2000s

These different worlds of musical mentorship converged in 2006 with the beginning of the National Park Service’s Music for All Ages program. The Treme Brass Band, with Terry on trumpet, was one of four brass bands that did monthly residencies. The young people of diverse backgrounds from both the city and suburbs were able to participate in this lineage. John Michael Bradford, a young trumpet player from the suburbs of New Orleans who developed his distinctive sound from playing with Terry and other brass band musicians in the program, talked with Terry about his early experiences:

Terry: My first time meeting y’all, Benny Jones Sr. and I were shocked. I said, “Oh Lord, alright, Benny. We got to work with them. We going to start showing them songs.”

Bradford: When I met you, I was scared.

Terry: You ran from me! But you and the others caught on so fast. I used to call your house, “Man, where is John Michael? Is he practicing?” Your mom was like, “Yeah, John, get your horn. Play this for Kenny.” See, we used to do that for the

Olympia. We get a show out of town, and you had to learn certain songs. They gave you the key over the phone. Play in F. Learn that song.

The young people involved in Music for All Ages also got a chance to take what they learned in the program to the streets when Bruce Sunpie Barnes formed the New Orleans Young Traditional Brass Band and connected them with the Black Men of Labor Social Aid and Pleasure Club. The club was formed in 1994 when Fred Johnson, a former member of the Bucketmen and organizer for Tambourine and Fan, joined forces with Stafford and Treme Brass Band leader Benny Jones Sr. to form a parading organization dedicated to keeping traditional music in second lines. Taking to the streets from 2006 to 2013, the New Orleans Young Traditional Brass Band's presence showed that the efforts of community-based social justice organizers, music educators like Barker and Batiste, musical recordings, and brass band musicians of different generations continue to have a lasting impact on the way the city sounds.

***Bruce Sunpie Barnes** is a photographer and veteran park ranger who recently retired in January 2015 from the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park. He is the leader of the band Sunpie and the Louisiana Sunspots and a member of Paul Simon's band currently touring with Sting.*

***Rachel Breunlin** is co-director of the Neighborhood Story Project. She is currently the ethnographer-in-residence at the University of New Orleans Department of Anthropology, where she teaches courses on public culture and collaborative ethnography.*

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