

# Keeping the Music Alive

by Chris Woolston, Hippocrates -  
Health and Medicine for Physicians

November 1998 – Internist *Cathi Fontenot* of New Orleans doesn't care much for blues or jazz, but she cares deeply about the people who make the music. *Dr. Fontenot, medical director of the LSU Healthcare Network, donates one day a week to running a primary care clinic for musicians, the only one of its kind in the country.* She's doing her part to keep the New Orleans sound alive.

Every Wednesday *Dr. Fontenot* sees a new batch of musicians, ranging from jazz singers to cajun fiddlers, at the **New Orleans Musicians' Clinic**. The staff offers basic care and referrals to specialists, all on a sliding scale. "Musicians are one of the city's most valuable resources," she says.

"I don't know why nobody paid this kind of special attention to them before. "The musical lifestyle itself is a blueprint for bad health: late nights in smoky bars, relentless financial anxieties, and the risk of repetitive strain injury. Arthritis, carpal tunnel syndrome, and hearing and dental problems are common



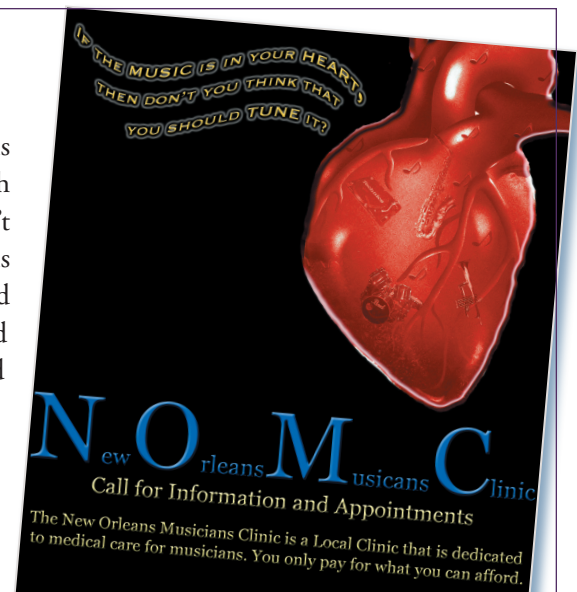
as are alcoholism and drug abuse..." Musicians don't tend to worry about chest pains or anything else until it affects their ability to sing or play their instruments," *Dr. Fontenot* says.

She works for free but does get something in return: a chance to meet some colorful personalities. The patients, *Dr. Fontenot* says, love to talk about their music and travels. They also bring a certain flair to the waiting room. One of her recent visitors was veteran R&B singer *Ernie K-Doe*, whose song "Mother-in-Law" was a number

one hit in 1961. The popular performer came to his appointment wearing a full tuxedo and carrying a batch of autographed glossies for the staff....Although he didn't complain of any symptoms, his wife worried about his drinking. After a workup that included a series of blood tests, *Dr. Fontenot* diagnosed the singer with mild glaucoma and alcohol-induced hepatitis, and prescribed a drug to treat his alcoholism.

This clinic has really changed the attitudes of musicians," says trombonist *Mark McGram*, whom the clinic treated for chronic depression. "It's great to have somebody watching out for us instead of wondering how cheap they can get us for a Saturday night."

That is exactly what clinic founder *Johann Bultman* had in mind. But as a community health planner, he had a larger vision: Treat the musicians and the whole city might get healthier. "Musicians are the thoughtleaders of New Orleans," says *Bultman*. "You don't see kids on the street emulating gangsters, you see them with sticks and cans emulating musicians. They really are the coolest guys in the neighborhoods. When they start taking care of themselves, others might follow." + (Article Excerpt) © Hippocrates – Health & Medicine for Physicians



## Maintaining the Health

New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Foundation Annual Report 2002

*Cathi Fontenot, a general practitioner with the clinic since its inception, says that while performers' health problems are similar to the rest of the population's, certain health issues can seriously impact a musician's livelihood. "Carpal tunnel syndrome may be a major inconvenience for you or me. For a piano player, it means he's temporarily unable to earn a living. I'm in this because I'm interested in maintaining the health of our local musicians," Fontenot said. "Their impact on our community is seriously underestimated." Clinic organizers hope having musicians take their health seriously will inspire the rest of the city.* + (Article Excerpt) © New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Foundation

