

Sad Reality Sinks in for New Orleans Music Scene

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by Todd Martens
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Like nearly every house in New Orleans, *Bethany Bultman's* home has holes in its roof. Buckets to catch rainwater surround her desk, and she is hesitant to go out at night. Much of her neighborhood is still completely without power.

She is one of the lucky ones. Leaky roof aside, her house suffered little damage, and she has a second one in Massachusetts, a world away from the devastation Hurricane Katrina inflicted last August. Bultman admits to missing her Cape Cod getaway, but she cannot bring herself to abandon New Orleans. There would be the guilt of leaving behind the city and those who are suffering, but more important, there are checks to write.

Bultman inscribes upwards of 70 per week, each for \$100, each given to a New Orleans musician. To date, her efforts have been funded largely by donations from Pearl Jam and nonprofit organization Jazz Aspen Snowmass.

The checks Bultman writes are allocated only to those who work, which these days in New Orleans can mean performing at a club in front of a handful of Federal Emergency Management Agency workers.

On many nights, money from the door is minimal or nonexistent. Bultman hopes her \$100 subsidy is enough to dissuade someone from taking a gig in another city. If instruments and artifacts from the city's musical heritage were washed away, then New Orleans' soul – the musicians who define it – must stay.

"As the time wore on," Bultman says, "more and more musicians who were dumped all over the country wanted to come back. We soon realized that this is really about giving people instruments and giving people hope, and that's when we started paying the gig fees."

Two months ago, Bultman, a writer/historian and the co-founder of the **New Orleans Musicians' Clinic**, was urging displaced musicians to return to the city. She started the clinic with her husband in 1998 with the assistance of *Dr. Jack B. McConnell*, the

developer of Tylenol tablets whose son, *Page*, played keyboards for the band *Phish*. With a mix of pride and a dedication to preserving a music culture that she says "percolates out of the ground," Bultman hoped all New Orleans' evacuees would soon be returning.

'New Orleans Is Not A Healthy Place'

Reality, however, soon sunk in, and now she is not so sure. "The goal was to get everyone we could get back to New Orleans," she says. "Now that we're back, we've moved away from that. We've moved away from the fantasy that everything would go back to the way it was. New Orleans is just not a healthy place for everyone to come to."

Eight of the city's ZIP codes are still without full power, according to the January 24 status report from the mayor's office. The area affected most by Katrina – the Ninth Ward – remains under curfew, and 911 emergency availability is scattered. Few hospitals are open, and the **New Orleans Musicians' Clinic**, which had free use of the Louisiana State University School of Medicine in New Orleans, has lost such privileges, as much of the facility needs extensive repairs.

And for many, life was not all that great before Katrina. One in four of the city's residents lived below the poverty line, and a great number of its working musicians relied on a steady influx of tourists.

Bultman stays in touch with the national organizations providing relief to New Orleans musicians, including *MusiCares*, which announced its pledge in support of her efforts January 25.

She is heartened by the outpouring of generosity of her top donors and has nothing but praise for *MusiCares*. But five months after Katrina, Bultman feels that little has been accomplished. Nearly all of the 200 musicians she helps lack a place to live. She worries the situation will only get worse with a dearth of health care and tries to communicate to the national associations that the effort to restore the music community in New Orleans is one that will take years – and one that will happen one saxophone at a time.



Return To Self-sufficiency

Pianist *Joe Krown* was playing 12 gigs per week prior to Katrina. His wife, who worked at Tulane University Hospital, was laid off after the hurricane. He filled out the paperwork for nearly every charity dedicated to helping musicians.

"I have a mortgage and rent and no income, and before I said anything more to a couple of them, there was a check in the mail," Krown says. "That happened with *MusiCares* and the **New Orleans Musicians' Clinic** and the Jazz Foundation." +

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Musicians bring quick recovery for peers in New Orleans

While government agencies and insurers seem to bring relief to New Orleans at a snail's pace, an international group of musicians, who gathered for a benefit concert in September have delivered \$2.8 million in much-needed cash to 21 local musical institutions and 193 musicians in record time. Of the recipients, the **New Orleans Musicians' Clinic** received a grant from the Higher Ground Relief Fund.