

## Hot 8 Brass Band

If you had walked into the Old Town School of Folk Music this past Wednesday night at 10pm, you would have come through the double doors of the concert hall and run straight into a crowded dance floor. The dancers ranged in age from 18-65, ranged in description from mentally handicapped adults to college kids on the party to Rastafarians to Polish middle-agers. The energy that supplied the dancing legs for this diverse group of hip-shakers was the sound of the Hot 8 Brass Band, a nine-piece New Orleans outfit who came to Old Town as the last act in its month-long AfroFolk series. The AfroFolk series has featured music from the African Diaspora, the acts coming from Brazil, Cuba, and Jamaica. The Hot 8 Brass Band was the first act in the series to play a uniquely American brand of music, and the first act to fill the dance floor. To understand why the concert was so lively on a Wednesday night during Chicago's wet, grey, and frozen spring, you have to understand where New Orleans brass band music comes from. You have to start thinking about what New Orleans is and why, when a brass band plays, the audience has to move its feet.

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"Brass band" is a generic name for a style of music indigenous to New Orleans that also goes by the monikers "second line" and "funeral jazz." Those names point to the fact that the largest source tributary for brass band music is the march music played in traditional African-American funerals in New Orleans. In the old days, the family of the deceased and the members of the benevolent society to which the family belonged composed the funeral party. A band followed the party and led the hearse that held the body. The band would play a funeral dirge from the Church toward the cemetery and the people would wail and mourn. At some point in the procession the band would open up, let the hearse pass through its midst, and the music would change to more upbeat spirituals set to marching music as the people "cut the body loose" by transitioning from mourning to celebrating the life of the deceased and the expected life in the world to come. In that traditional scenario, the band was the "second line" of the funeral procession and the bystanders who joined the walk to the cemetery to hear the music were called "second liners."

Second line music coalesced into a form around the turn of the century and has been absorbing influences ever since. Today's "brass band music" is the confluence of second line music, traditional New Orleans jazz, and the soul/R&B/funk music of the 1970s, and its lineage can be traced to the early 80s when the Dirty Dozen Brass Band, which in one way or another has spawned all the other major brass band acts, began setting the traditional second line tunes to funkier, higher tempo rhythms. Kermit Ruffins is brass band music's reigning king of the trumpet, and the legend goes that he learned to bring the funk while playing for Dirty Dozen alongside Keith "Wolf" Anderson, currently the trombone player for the Hot 8 Brass Band.

"Keith done taught a whole generation of players this kind of music," said Jerome Jones, Hot 8's second trombone player. "One way or another almost everybody that plays this kind of music come through Keith."

Brass band music is a popular art form, folk music, and as such the genealogy of players is important. The core of the Hot 8 Brass Band attended high school in Uptown New Orleans at Fortier H.S., where they trained under the school's band director Elijah Bremmer. Hot 8 members Jerome Jones, Cliff Stewart, Harry Cook and Bennie Pete all came through the Fortier band room. They formed the Looney Tunes Brass Band as high school students and honed their skills playing the street corners of the French Quarter. That is where they and many other young musicians crossed paths with Keith "Wolf" Anderson.

"Young musicians will go to the Quarter to make a little change," Anderson told me. "By playing together you get better and better. It's practice without bothering the neighbors and the tourists love it... it's like the Hostess Twinkie, two treats in one."

"Wolf" Anderson was born in Chicago in 1961 to parents who had grown up in New Orleans and moved to the Windy City to work in the Zenith television factory. He returned to New Orleans at age 9, and received formal training on the cornet, baritone horn, and sousaphone. He taught himself trombone and has played it ever since. I asked him why he prefers the trombone.

"I can do more things on the trombone."

Watching Keith Anderson on stage, my first impression of him was that he was a loose cannon. He likes to ham it up, cracking corny jokes and making faces at the crowd. But when you hear the sound he makes with the trombone, you understand that he is a natural musician, something very special. The tone he gets from his instrument and the way he matches his solos with the band are both proof that he hears music in a way that very few players do.

"I can hear anything and I can come right out and play it. I got good ears," he said.

He's not a comfortable interview. You can tell he'd rather just be playing music. I asked him about teaching Kermit Ruffins.

"I just changed the style of the music a little bit and the other guys caught on."

What was your influence?

"It was myself... I just made it modern, funkied it up... I felt it that way. It was less boring that way."

All of the members of Hot 8 grew up around the second line culture. They learned the music by hearing it in the streets, by learning from old timers in their own families or at church. They learned to read music in the high school marching bands, and then they perfected their skills by playing for tips on street corners in the French Quarter.

That story is typical of all New Orleans brass bands. The part of the Hot 8 Brass Band story that is not typical and that has received increased media attention in past months following the December 1996 fatal shooting of their snare drummer, Dinerral Shavers, is that three members of the band have died violently since the band first formed. Shavers, while not an original member, joined the band at the age of 13, and worked as the music teacher at a local high school at the time of his fatal shooting. In 1996, trumpet player Jacob Johnson was killed "execution style" in his home. In 2004 trombone player Joe Williams was shot dead by police under controversial circumstances. As a result of the killings, the band has become a symbol of the suffering post-Katrina New Orleans, a city that has had to rely on spirituality and music to cope with its violent fate. But the band members take that packaged story with a grain of salt.

Jerome Jones, who was the first band leader of Hot 8 and now plays trombone, is an intense young man who is not afraid to talk about politics, New Orleans' culture of corruption, or the fact that the problems the city's residents experience, highly publicized since Katrina, have been manifest since 1985.

"You wanna deal with the murder problem?" Jones told me. "Deal with what you've been doing to cause the murder problem. That's taken everything a way from a kid... If you take every extracurricular program from sports to music from the schools since 1985 ad it's 2007, what you want them kids to do? That's generations of chaos."

Jones was polite and open when he spoke to me, but there was anger in his voice.

"I done said this a number of times on press and you ain't hear it. You know why? Cause they edit it out."

What is the real story of the Hot 8 Brass Band? Are they unlucky? Are they typical New Orleans musicians? Are they brass music's answer to thug life?

I got the idea to write about Hot 8 after I met their manager, Lee Arnold, at the R Bar on Royal St. in the Marigny section of New Orleans last month. I had been in New Orleans covering The Walkmen and decided to stay an extra two days to take in some local music. I have been obsessed with brass band music ever since I saw the Rebirth Brass Band play a 3 am show at Tipitina's during last year's New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. I saw two brass band shows during my last stay and then met Lee, who said his band was coming to Chicago in a couple of weeks. The idea of a brass band on tour struck me as a good way to tell the story that so many people have been trying to tell since the hurricane: what is the relationship between New Orleans and the rest of America?

They say in every band there are as many stories as there are players. In a rock band, that's five stories. In a jazz quartet that's four stories. In the Hot 8 Brass Band that's at least nine stories. Too many for me to cover.

I sat down with Bennie Pete, the Hot 8's bandleader and longest-running member, for an hour after their second show at Old Town in two days. They had just played a 10:30am show to a group of high school students and a group of residents from a home for the elderly as part of the Old Town School of Folk Music's Field Trip Series. I was not surprised when, after the second song, the dance floor filled up again.

"This music does something crazy to people," Lee whispered to me, as we watched a very old couple with arthritic joints shuffle around the dance floor to the raucous sound of seven horns and two drums.

Bennie Pete plays the tuba, otherwise known as the sousaphone or the bass horn. The tuba is like the bass in a jazz band, the musical bridge between the rhythm section and the horns. Bennie is 6'7" tall and not delicate in his build. He speaks in a soft voice that has music in its New Orleanian twang.

Among other things, Bennie told me his version of the Hot 8 story surviving Hurricane Katrina.

The members of Hot 8 were all Katrina evacuees. Bennie Pete had relocated to Atlanta after the storm and said he had been keeping tabs on his band mates by "chirping" them on his Nextel phone when he received a call from Lee Arnold. Lee was working in Miami at the time, doing logistical work for music video production. Lee says he cannot remember why he called Bennie so soon after the storm, but he remembers that he asked Bennie what the band was up to and when Bennie told him nothing, Lee knew clearly and cosmically what his contribution to the rebuilding effort was going to be.

Three members of the band-trumpet/MC Al Huntley, saxophone player Cliff Stewart, and snare drummer Dinerral Shavers-were stuck in New Orleans five days after the storm and had nowhere to go when they got out.

Lee's own family evacuated and resettled with a relative in Shreveport, Louisiana. Lee suggested to Bennie that the band members reunite in Shreveport. He arranged instrument donations from the marching bands at LSU and two local high schools. Then he booked them two gigs in Baton Rouge.

When Bennie related the story to me he nodded at his tuba case.

"That's my own horn," he said. "I went back to my house a long while after and it was stuck in my backyard. It was stuck inside the mud. I pulled it out of the ground, pop, and poured some grease in it and everything."

The rest of the guys lost their instruments to the flood. After Lee got them loaners, they played the two reunion gigs in Baton Rouge, and felt immediately that the music was what they needed to keep going. The shows were extremely emotional for a group of guys who had already been through a lot together. The morning after their second show, they decided to take their instruments down to the evacuee camp at Southern University.

"We all felt the same way," Bennie said. "Let's go play. Let's just go crank up the band like we do and lift these people's spirits..."

The news crews who were covering the evacuees had never heard brass band music, and when they saw that many of the people already knew the band members, they fell on the story like wolves. Bennie was very clear about the effect of Katrina on the band. The press coverage helped them get more shows, more national notoriety. But it has not given them financial success.

"This band has been through so much together I feel like we should write a book about it."

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Just gimme a call, Bennie. I'll write it.

Katrina was just one more tragedy in a long line of them for Hot 8. Bennie says he does not really understand why the band has seen three of its members slain, "We was young and we was kids and I know all of us. And we ain't angels but we ain't evil people. None of us was ever trying to hurt anybody."

He told me that for brass bands in New Orleans, murder is a fact of life.

"It's sad to say but we used of murder in New Orleans. So we always performing for jazz funerals. We seeing the faces

of the sisters and mothers and fathers crying. It's a gig for us but it's more than that. We there with them."

Music, life, and death are all present when a brass band plays a jazz funeral. The funerals are put on these days by the Social Aid and Pleasure clubs and bands like Hot 8 get most of their business that way. Hot 8 only plays the big New Orleans clubs like Tipitina's and House of Blues during the Mardi Gras and Jazz Fest seasons, and they are usually underpaid for that kind of show.

I asked Bennie about the first member of the band to be slain. I asked him what it was like to be that young and have one of your friends killed.

"Jacob was murdered in his house. That really flipped us out. He was just seventeen. That was just unexpected. The guys who did it knew him cause he cut hair. The police, everybody knew him. He lived in the projects and he would just set there all day and cut hair, playing the trumpet. They come to rob him. They knew him and they thought he had money cause he cut hair and played with the band. How much money could he have if he living in the projects with you? That's just like what Jerome was saying. That's just the mentality of under-educated people..."

Violent, senseless killing is part of the African-American urban experience in New Orleans, a fact of nature, like a hurricane or a tornado. You do not ask yourself why the ones who are killed were killed if you can avoid it. You mourn them. You remember them. You might pray for them. Does that sound cliché? It is not a cliché if it is your brother or your band member or your son.

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I believe that if you hear a story told the same way a hundred times that it cannot be the whole truth, but that it must contain some of the truth. It's the paradox of clichés that they can both obscure the actual and reveal it. To make meaning out of a universal story, you have to make it particular again.

I asked Bennie about why he thinks the cycle of violence perpetuates itself in New Orleans and he told me a tale often told. A story about single mothers with male children, born in the father's image, and about the hate and resentment that builds in the son, who is scorned for looking like a father he never knew.

"It's just repeated in everybody's household," he said.

I asked him how the music fit into the scheme.

"Cause if you was that child and your mom told you [you were bad] and you cooked your own food, you might walk outside and you might see the second line coming and you might run with it... You feel me. That's how it comes into play. It's always there, just like the public bus. You might see it pass on the way to the corner store. You mighta just missed it. That might be the band coming up the block."

And that was the answer I was looking for. In New Orleans, the music is always there, an ancient conduit of sound and culture around which communities are born. In a brass band there are personality archetypes, there are musical roles,

and there are individual personalities. Trumpet players are peacocks, the virtuosos performers, the high voice of the band, the swagger, the last to arrive and first to leave. Trombone players are feel musicians, their bodies move with their instruments and their voice is a story-telling voice. The tuba player is the low end, the anchor. He acts as a translator and interpreter between the rhythm and the horn. The saxophone is a soul cry, the sad wailing voice in the party, the lonely poet. The bass drum is the heartbeat. The snare is the dancer, the happy feet. Together a brass band makes up a complete social unit, capable of expressing the entire range of human emotion.Â

"Most tuba players are the understandable guys," Bennie said. "They more humble and wise."

The reason everyone dances when the Hot 8 Brass Band plays is because the music pulls you into its story, pushes you deeper into your own.

"There ain't no proper way to dance to this music," Al Huntley called to the crowd. "So come on ya'll."

And then I was watching a young white kid with a mohawk and sunglasses getting down next to a middle-aged woman in bi-focals who was smiling at a little man with Downs syndrome who was wagging his arms over his head in joy.

Brass band music is about finding joy in pain by letting the music flow through you while your body moves. It is not an overly technical style of music, and maybe that is why it does not sell a lot of records and why it does not play outside of New Orleans like it should.

"We have a argument about Kermit Ruffins and Wynton Marsalis ," Bennie told me. "People be like, man, Winton Marsalis would run circles around Kermit. And they right. If you gonna go out with your wife and listen to the music and you go set there with a number card and judge it then Winton is 10 and Kermit be 5. But if you wanna go out and shake a leg you wanna hear Kermit."

Hot 8, in the world of New Orleans brass bands, has earned its place and reputation by being a close-knit, community-focused local act that makes its living playing funerals and parties. Now the band is trying reach more broadly, touring the U.S. and hoping to get a record deal that will allow them to continue to live and record in their hometown.

The world of brass band players is incestuous. Often times the players will go play where the money is best. Hot 8 has lost horn players and drummers to the likes of Rebirth, Soul Rebels, and Dirty Dozen. If you are in search of mind-blowing virtuoso trumpet playing, then Hot 8 is not the greatest brass show in New Orleans. What Hot 8 has going for it is a telepathic rhythm section, a soulful song list, and two bookend trombone players in Anderson and Jones that will keep you watching.

I asked saxophone player Cliff Stewart what separates Hot 8 from its competitors.

"We're like a family," he said. "That's what makes it special to me."

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What does New Orleans have to do with the rest of America?Â

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Like the last grove of trees in a primordial forest, New Orleans is at one time a monument to the musical past and its last surviving seed, a place where a band of young men can live their whole lives together playing party music with an old soul song buried in it, without the help of amplification, recording studios, or the record industry.

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Check the Hot 8 out at  
[MySpace.com/Hot8BrassBand](http://MySpace.com/Hot8BrassBand) .