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Magical Musical New Orleans

by Marci Johnson

I have always dreamed of singing jazz in a smoky voice while lying on a piano in a long, slinky, silver silk gown, a gardenia in my black curls. My hypnotic voice would captivate my audience. Reality check: I have no piano, no silver gown, my hair is blonde and frankly, I cannot sing very well

I am lucky to live in New Orleans where spine-tingling jazz singers abound. As I walked down the street last week holding my toddler's hand, we both stopped, hearing an angel's voice coming out of a dusty, gutted home. "Who's singing?" my daughter asked as we turned around. We watched a large man covered in grime come out of the house, carrying a metal ladder over his shoulder, a smile on his face. His voice filled the air with quiet beauty and my eyes with tears. This is New Orleans, steeped in the magic of music.

"I think music is central to all societies—to the betterment of those who populate those societies. But it is the essence of New Orleans," asserts John Snyder, the Conrad N. Hilton Eminent Scholar of Music Industry Studies at Loyola University and multiple Grammy award winner. "Very few places can be called the birthplace of movements, of art forms, that affect so many people in so many places in so many ways. Very few places can claim music and art as profoundly as New Orleans and Louisiana. From this cradle came most, if not all, of what we call 'American' music... that has inspired and influenced artists and others who've never been here, who may not even be aware of the source of the inspiration that informs their existence and their lives." Most artists, even non-artists, would probably agree. The earth, the trees, the air all radiate artistic inspiration, at least for me. Nowhere else in the world am I inspired to wrap a pink boa around my neck and sing "Iko Iko" while writing. I know countless others who are moved to create once they set foot in Louisiana.



Professor Snyder's creativity is stimulated here as well. Long before moving to Louisiana, he recorded here - nearly one hundred recordings at Dockside Studios in Maurice, LA over the last thirteen years. All but one turned out "positive and successful. Three hundred year old oak trees, sugar cane fields stretching to the horizon; I fell in love with the insouciant beauty and languid indifference of the place. It felt old and mysterious to me." He has produced recordings for some of music's greatest (e.g., Chet Baker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Dave Brubeck), and often takes his students to record at Dockside. They are getting the best possible education in music business, including eight student-run companies at Loyola, a college radio station and record label. He creates a more holistic approach to music education by bringing different fields together, e.g., Business, Music, and Ethics. Thanks to Snyder's help, the world-renowned Thelonius Monk Institute relocated to New Orleans. He is working with Herb Alpert to create Artists House, a one-stop, online, resource for those desiring a music career.

With his vast musical experience, Professor Snyder knows nothing compares with New Orleans. "Never in my travels have I come across a place where the depth of musical talent was so great. Talent is the greatest natural resource of the place." Who can argue? It is on street corners, in nightclubs, in universities, even in churches. "Music is sacrament," says Professor Snyder. Amen. To many New Orleanians, me included, music is a religious experience. When I go to Jazz Fest or Preservation Hall, my soul is enriched in ways impossible to articulate. New Orleans, the originator of jazz, oozes music from its every pore. Even the devastated areas sing their sad lament; in the intact areas, the deep and sacred joy of New Orleans' music is indomitable. For Professor Snyder, "Jazz is the music of self-expression and respect. The language of jazz is the sum total of all who express it and use it to communicate the pain and passion of how we feel as individuals. It is the music of the Americas, our gift to the world..."

What a gift! Late last night I was pacing the floor with my eight-month-old son in my arms, trying to get him to sleep. Everything was dark and quiet, except for an extraordinary voice singing a gospel tune. I walked back to the nursery and looked out. In the tall glowing windows of the carriage house behind ours, I saw a body, her feet wrapped in a blanket, sheet music on her lap, a mug in one hand, the other hand floating and waving in time to her singing. I stood there, my baby's heart beating next to mine, his head on my shoulder, and let the music wash over us. Another magical, musical moment in New Orleans. ♦

Marci Johnson, Ed.M. is a free-lance writer with delusions of being a chanteuse. She holds degrees from UCLA and Harvard and lives in New Orleans with her husband and two children.

Interested

in becoming a performer, or considering a career in one of the hundreds of jobs behind the scenes in music? Then Artists House Music will empower you in learning what is needed to pursue a career in the music field. John Snyder, Professor of Music at Loyola University, in New Orleans, is founder and president of Artists House Music. Funded by the Herb Albert Foundation, Artists House Music is a non-profit music company devoted to creating educational presentations in several areas, including instruction for instruments, master classes, careers in the arts, and legendary performers.

The foundation created this online website where all who are interested in performing or non-performing careers can receive guidance, support and expert resources to help maximize the opportunities and face the challenges within the music industry. Visit www.artistshousemusic.com



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