



Soul Rebels Brass Band

TIFFANI HUBBARD

# THE BIG EASY'S EMISSARIES

With thousands of musicians displaced, the Soul Rebels do their part to rebuild in the post-Katrina era.

By Erik Gleibermann

**IN THE DAYS AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA**, the band members from the Soul Rebels Brass Band—dispersed from Texas to South Carolina and beyond—made a pledge over their cell phones. They would go home again and blast funk-infused horns at club Le Bon Temps Roulé. They would do this even though everyone's primary instrument was ruined, drowned in the flood, except the precious saxophone Erion Williams had on his hip when fleeing north up Interstate 10.

"Those sax players feel that horn is so delicate, cats have to keep it on them all the time," explained band leader and snare drummer Lumar Leblanc.

The other six ensemble members borrowed instruments or received a donation piece through one of the private relief organizations that quickly sprung up in the wake of the storm. Six weeks after Katrina, Leblanc embraced his wife, mother and son—exiled with him in Houston—jumped behind the wheel of his junk truck next to bandmate Marcus Hubbard, who was holding a trumpet in his lap, and headed for New Orleans to reignite the Rebels' Thursday night Le Bon Temps jam.

Three years later, with homes still shuttered in New Orleans and having determined that Houston is economically better-suited for their

families, Leblanc and Hubbard continue their ritual: the 350-mile desert drive every Thursday morning, Hubbard's shave and neighborhood gossip session with the old hometown barber down in the Seventh Ward and a quick car nap before heating up Le Bon Temps till 3 a.m. Over a standard weekend, the Rebels will then play gigs at Café Brasil, the Dragon's Den, a private event and maybe a street parade. When Sunday morning arrives, Leblanc offers gratitude at St. Maria Goretti Church, then journeys with Hubbard back to Houston, where they have four days of family time before the road calls again.

Their weekly return from the Katrina diaspora symbolizes the latest chapter in a burdened city's historical struggle to convert pain into musical celebration. Survival for the Soul Rebels has meant extending to the core of their lives the improvisational jazz agility first developed as children beating on kitchen pots with wooden spoons.

"I began to see the ride as a pilgrimage," Leblanc explains. "After Katrina, my job was gone, and all I had was my music. I want to show people that New Orleans is a place so important to people that a musician would be willing to take this journey."

While Leblanc, Hubbard and the rest of the band are again making a living playing music in New Orleans, many other musicians have not had enough resources to survive the post-Katrina economic and housing devastation. About a quarter of approximately 4,500 professional musicians remain displaced according to a recent study conducted by the relief organization Renew Our Music, while the city has lost approximately half of its 400,000 pre-Katrina residents overall.

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The Soul Rebels are one of many surviving brass bands who serve as unofficial public emissaries of the New Orleans musical culture in the post-Katrina era, vitalizing the street parades, jazz funerals and late night clubs that define the city's energy. Some other popular brass bands, such as Preservation Hall and The Storyville Stompers, hark back to a traditional Dixieland style, but a new generation bred in the electronic era and nurtured on soul and R&B has modernized the old brass band lineup while preserving strict emphasis on live musicianship. The Rebels, who range in age from 22 to 42, have been trained in both secondary school and university musical programs and flow easily between the two brass band styles.

"We can play 'When the Saints Go Marching In' when we choose to," says Hubbard, and the band enjoys a Dixieland march down Bourbon St. in red vests, bow ties and fedoras. But their home vibration pulses after hours

in an underground dance fest amidst gold medallions and muscle shirts, pumping a hip-hop-inflected number through brass tubes.

The group has been working this year on its new album, *No Place Like Home*, a rich bouillabaisse of funk, soul, hip-hop, Latin and reggae pinched with a little lighthearted trash talk. *No Place Like Home* gets the Rebels back to a live club sound after the studio-driven *Rebellion* (2005), scaling back synthesized hip-hop beats and electronic keyboards to open the space for full-on acoustic horn blasts.

A Thursday night jam at Le Bon Temps exemplifies the best of live New Orleans clubbing. It's a post-midnight sweat revel in a storefront hole in the wall. It's music stripped naked: no stage, no separation between players and audience—just a freestyle house party with a business listing. During the July *Essence* Music Festival, partygoers jostle for jump space when the 1:00 a.m. set gets rolling, with another one still on tap, as the Rebels break into their signature "Let Your Mind Be Free." Somehow, Winston Turner keeps his trombone slider from sideswiping a grooving sister's head on the low notes. At Turner's shoulder, Hubbard raps into the crowd while Leblanc keeps beats, his robust torso double the size of the snare drum, the Gulf Coast humidity shining off the front of his clean-shaven head.

During the weekend, the band members flip through several costumes and invent melodies on the fly. Friday afternoon at a BET live waterfront broadcast, they interpret a new release soul tune they've heard for the first time that day. Two hours later, they're huddling with emerging Def Jam diva Chrisette Michele to devise a playlist for Beyoncé's performance after-party. Word from Ms. Knowles is to flavor the night with classic jazz and R&B. The Rebels engineer the preparation, working off each other on "Take the A Train" to build trumpet, trombone, tuba and sax parts around Michele's fluttering voice.

"If one guy has a good feel for a new tune on his own," explains trombonist Turner, "he leads, and we jump in to figure out what he's doing. We put all the pieces together like a puzzle so by the time the song's actually over, we all know it." Adds Leblanc, "That's how Miles and Dizzy always did it."

The song "504," for example, was born during a tourist welcome gig at Louis Armstrong Airport when Hubbard launched into an unscripted, trumpet-punctuated area code shout-out, prompting everyone's instrument to take off in chase.

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Creativity in the heat of performance is not only a signature of their jazz ethic, it's a necessity, given that with



Marcus Hubbard at Tipitina's in New Orleans

DINO PERRUCCI

Leblanc and Hubbard back in Houston four days a week, the band has virtually no rehearsal time. Leblanc says the closest thing he gets to practice is the long Thursday commute that he and Hubbard “utilize to explore how we want the band to blossom. You can grow weary driving those 350 miles, and talking things through can be very therapeutic.”

Leblanc sometimes composes into a tape recorder while Hubbard, unwilling to expose his lips to a potentially damaging pothole jolt, waits 200 miles to finally break out the trumpet in a Louisiana roadside gas station to test a riff for that night's performance.

“We're blessed to be able to do this,” Leblanc affirms, but the band members recognize that despite their personal success adapting to the post-Katrina era, the musical tradition that stands behind their achievements remains vulnerable. New Orleans music has always grown out of close-knit communities with a delicate fabric of informal transmission among extended families, in homes and along curbsides, an atmosphere where a child mimics an older sibling drumming marching-band rhythms on the way home from school. Today, many of those blocks contain only the shells of houses.

Katrina spurred several of the Rebels to build upon earlier university music study to investigate their traditional jazz heritage at a deeper level. Along with

members of other young, contemporary brass bands, they joined a weekly workshop with Dr. Michael White, a Xavier University scholar of the New Orleans tradition and a prominent clarinetist. They have also passed their learning to the next generation, using nonprofit grant funds to teach elementary and high school students about traditional jazz. Hubbard models success by telling his own story of youthful self-doubt, wondering as a high school senior 12 years ago whether he could make it as a trumpet player.

“When the kids see bands like us performing, they feel like we're untouchable,” he says. “I try to show up and let them know I was where they are now not that long ago.”

The vast array of musicians in New Orleans with jazz in their roots comprises an extended family recovering from common loss. The long pilgrimage Leblanc and Hubbard make from Houston each week not only keeps their own gig going, it acts as another strand to strengthen the wider web of musical kinship. So when the Rebels are out parading on a warm Sunday morning, a casual bystander may hear only the sound of just another one of those colorful brass bands, but the city, listening all around, hears her children coming home. ■

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