In New Orleans, the Show Goes On; Jazzfest Returns, With a Larger-than-Expected Crowd on Hand to Celebrate the City's Music -- and Its Post-Katrina Spirit

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NEW ORLEANS, April 30 -- The concertgoers came in droves. Displaced New Orleanians and other music fans wanted to show their support to a beleaguered city, and in doing so they transformed a once-flooded horse-race track into the same massive party that the annual New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival has always been.

With a bigger-than-expected turnout for its initial three-day weekend of concerts -- organizers won't reveal exact ticket sales until Sunday, when the second weekend ends -- and headliners such as Bruce Springsteen as well as zydeco favorites Terrance Simien and C.J. Chenier, the celebration was a sign that the core of the city's cultural identity has survived Hurricane Katrina. Even before the festival gates opened, lines were snaking around the Fair Grounds.

On Friday, Ellen Harris, a fifth-generation New Orleanian who left but now lives again in the city, danced as Simien played his accordion to the accompaniment of two band members strumming rub boards. He was wearing a wide-brimmed Senegalese hat to shield himself from the sun.

"We have a lot of dancing and singing and healing to do in our city, but it's great to have our festival back," Harris said, scanning the thousands of people around her.

If Mardi Gras has become something of a vestige of New Orleans past, with drunken revelers vying for plastic beads as costumed krewe members pass by on floats, Jazzfest, with its music and food, more embodies the city's place in American culture today. More than 90 percent of this year's performers, representing such genres as jazz and hip-hop, hail from New Orleans or southern Louisiana, say festival officials.

"If this city didn't exist, I would not be doing what I do," said jazz great Herbie Hancock, who offered to perform as soon as he learned that the festival would take place in its full form this year. "It's really the birthplace of jazz, so I owe a great deal, an enormous amount, to New Orleans and this whole Delta region."

In many ways the festivities were an act of defiance, a reunion of musicians scattered across the country and food and craft vendors who are still struggling to rebuild their businesses.

Bassist George Porter Jr. of the Meters has played at the festival every year since it began in 1970. Although he temporarily lives 52 miles away in Darrow, La., he set up shop in his flood-damaged home on Pine Street so he could perform at Jazzfest.
"We don't have a stove, but there's lots of food at Jazzfest," Porter explained as he oversaw contractors in his home. "We'll buy some food, bring it back and put it in the microwave."

As Galactic bassist Robert Mercurio of Chevy Chase said, "Sometimes the food overshadows the music, it's so good."

Jewelry maker Lorraine Eberts now divides her time between Knoxville, Tenn., and New Orleans. She plans to sell her wares from a booth next weekend. "In the first hour that I was here, I saw everyone I know," she marveled Friday.

Quint Davis, who produced and directed the festival, emphasized that this year's event is nearly the same except for "1 1/2 fewer stages, eight fewer food booths and two less crafts tents." By the time the festival ends, it will have promoted nearly 400 acts on 10 stages. It is one day shorter than last year's.

"People do not often understand the determination of people to return here and make it work," Davis said, adding that Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu (D), who oversees tourism and is vying to become New Orleans's next mayor, told him months ago, "Not having Jazzfest is not an option."

In mid-January, Shell Oil Co. resuscitated the festival by becoming its first "corporate presenter." Davis would not divulge the amount of the two-year underwriting commitment but said it was enough to ensure that this year's Jazzfest would rival its predecessors.

Frank Glaviano Sr., Shell's vice president for North and South America production, said the underwriting meshed with the company's pledge to support the rebuilding effort by keeping its U.S. headquarters here.

"If we wanted to leave New Orleans, we had our chance," said Glaviano, a New Orleans native, adding that he had confessed to a local priest that he had never attended the festival and would atone by showing up for all six days. "If we want to help the rebuilding, we have to get the wheels of business turning, and getting money into the city does that."

The festival itself had a sometimes jarring juxtaposition of revelry and despair: As scantily clad fans danced in the sunshine, others walked the Fair Grounds with T-shirts bearing the motto "Make Levees, Not War" while others wore attire with more cynical messages. Not far from the festival's gates, abandoned furniture and trash remained piled on the streets.

"It's sort of like when company comes over, you clean the living room and the bathrooms and you close the door to the bedroom," said Terry Blouin, a health-care worker who lives in LaPlace, 30 miles west of New Orleans, but comes in often with her husband, Gary, to patronize the city's businesses.
While some musicians stuck to their traditional repertoires -- Bob Dylan played crowd favorites -- many made allusions to last August's catastrophe.

Fred LeBlanc, lead singer of the New Orleans-based Cowboy Mouth and one of several band members who suffered hurricane losses, belted out the group's anthem "Take Me Back To New Orleans" on Friday while exhorting the audience, "Yell like your life depends on it! Yell like the city depends on it!"

LeBlanc called the performance cathartic. "It's like I was helping myself, my band and my city lift a huge weight off our shoulders. That's the power of music, and the power of this city."

Out-of-town performers also paid homage to the city. In one of the weekend's most exuberant performances, Springsteen and the Seeger Sessions Band played a slew of songs that resonated with New Orleanians. Using a full horn section, fiddlers, a banjo player and an accordionist, he delivered a two-hour set Sunday evening that opened with "Mary, Don't You Weep" and included his rewritten version of the folk song "How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live?"

Before a crowd of thousands he sang the new lyrics:

There's bodies floatin' on Canal and the levees gone to hell

Martha get me my 16 gauge and some dry shells

Them's who's got got out of town

And them who ain't got left to drown

Tell me, how can a poor man stand such times and live?

Before the song, Springsteen also delivered a scathing assessment of President's Bush response to Hurricane Katrina, saying that having surveyed the city on Saturday, "The criminal ineptitude makes you furious. This is what happens when political cronyism guts the very agencies that are supposed to serve American citizens in times of trial and hardship."

But the most emotional song of the set came when Springsteen performed "My City of Ruins," as the crowd joined in the refrain, "Come on rise up, come on rise up."

Other times, the crowd drew its own interpretations from lines musicians had penned long ago. Ani DiFranco -- who moved to New Orleans a year ago and has decided to stay -- drew a roar from her audience, including women sporting dragonfly and mermaid tattoos, when she belted out feminist lyrics. "I live for the fight/Every tool is a weapon if you use it right," she sang.
For most of Jazzfest's performers and fans, showing up over the weekend amounted to a declaration of rebirth and revival.

Playing Friday afternoon, Simien looked out and saw the same music devotees he has seen for two decades. "This is their trip to Mecca. They come here to get their vibe right. That's not changed," he said Sunday.

"The spirit is back in New Orleans."