LOVE AT FEST SITE It has the music, the mud and the masses, but the first post-Katrina Jazzfest weekend is like no other

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It was a fitting end to the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival's first post-Katrina weekend: The Boss rolling out a new hit album to an enthusiastic audience.

Clad in a black short-sleeved shirt with several buttons open, Bruce Springsteen kicked off the day's closing performance by launching directly into a funky version of the African-American spiritual "Oh, Mary, Don't You Weep," featured on "We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions." He followed immediately with "John Henry," another favorite of legendary folk singer Pete Seeger.

Attendance seemed a tad smaller than the larger-than-expected crowds on Friday and Saturday, although festival officials would not release attendance figures on Sunday evening. Sunday's fest-goers represented a mix of out-of-towners and local residents.

Those arriving as the Fair Grounds gates opened at 11:30 a.m. were greeted by an infield only too familiar to festival veterans: a rain-soaked combination of new grass and muck. But while the muck remained in the most-traveled paths through music venues throughout the day, a mix of sunshine and clouds burned off some of the water around the edges.

The day's surprises began at the BellSouth WWOZ Jazz Tent, where Leigh "Little Queenie" Harris was caught off guard when her son, Alex MacDonald, took time out from his first onstage performance with his mother to propose to girlfriend, Jennifer Bostick. She said yes.

Harris had already become tearful earlier in her set when she sang the Cole Porter standard, "Every Time We Say Goodbye," in recognition of three friends who died in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Memories of Rita

But it was Hurricane Rita that Cajun legend D.L. Menard is still trying to deal with.

Speaking at the Allison Minor Music Heritage Stage to Nick Spitzer, music folklorist and host of the "American Routes" public radio show, Menard said that while his own home in Erath didn't flood, the devastation to 80 percent of the houses in the small town have delayed his plan to rebuild his furniture factory.

He told his contractor to take care of those flooded by Rita before starting on the factory.
Menard said he had never heard Cajun music until he was 16 1/2 years old, because when he was growing up, the music was only played in dance halls that sold liquor.

One day, he was invited to hear his uncle's band practice and was immediately hooked on the guitar playing.

"I went home and got out the Montgomery Ward catalog and told my father I wanted to buy a guitar," he said.

"Oh, no, your money's burning a hole in your pocket," he said his father told him, but he bought the guitar anyway, and within six months he joined the band he headlines with today, the Louisiana Aces.

Celebrating New Orleans

For Susan Henoch, the Fair Grounds is the latest stop on an odyssey that first drew her from her home in Princeton, N.J., to Houston a month after Katrina hit.

So overcome was Henoch at the devastation she saw on television that she immediately solicited friends, book publishers and bookstores to roundup children's books for storm victims.

She raised enough money to buy about 1,000 children's books, including copies of "Where the Wild Things Are" and "Bill and Pete Go Down the Nile." Then she delivered them to several academies that had been set up in Houston for New Orleans evacuees, reading some to classes before handing them out.

"There was a lot of trauma among those children," Henoch said. "You could see it.

"I was only there for one week, but I felt so good to do something," she said.

Dave Giddens and wife, Elaine Scott, of Arlington, Texas, just had to be in New Orleans this year.

"We felt fortunate to be able to get here this year," Giddens said. "We had thought that Jazzfest probably wouldn't even happen so soon after Katrina."


"We try to celebrate that anniversary here every year," Giddens said.

"This is my favorite festival and favorite city," Elaine Scott said. "Please survive, New Orleans. I need you."

'All kinds of people'
While thousands of people packed the Fair Grounds, Albert Davis, 13, stood alone along nearby Bayou St. John, casting his fishing pole.

"I'm fishing for blue gill," Albert said. "It's a little pan fish. I caught one just now, but it was too little, so I threw it back."

Albert said he's never been to Jazzfest and doesn't much care to go where "there are beaucoup people listening to music."

That's something he can do anytime for free, he said.

Vehicles lined the streets of City Park and nearby neighborhoods, where the scent of barbecues and crawfish boils wafted from back yards.

Many people walking along tree-lined Carrollton Avenue appeared to be dancing as they hopped over buckmoth caterpillars dropping from the canopy of oaks limbs above.

People watching is one of the pleasures of living near the Fair Grounds, said Madelyn Garrity, who watched the passing parade with her husband, Raymond, from the front porch of their cottage on Esplanade Avenue at Maurepas Street.

"Last night, it was like Mardi Gras out here," Garrity said. "There were some people who had a few beers too many, but most were just trotting along trying to find their cars again."

The parade of fest-goers begins between 9 and 10 in the morning, said George Rooks, who is renting half of a shotgun double on Maurepas after he had 10 feet of flood water in his house in St. Bernard.


Then he pointed to several houses on the block where fellow St. Bernard residents are renting. "We're just filling this place up with Chalmatians," he said. "This is going to be the new Judge Perez Drive."

The parade also must run a gantlet of vendors attempting to entice fest-goers with goodies before those inside the Fair Grounds have a monopoly on their money.

"Ice cold. Ice cold water. One dollar," called Robert Ruffin on one side of Esplanade Avenue. His wife, Ashley, and 7-year-old son Robert Jr. echoed the call as they sold cold drinks from a cooler on the opposite side of the avenue.

"We got flooded out," Ruffin said, adding that the money he makes will help him rebuild his Mid-City home. He and his family are living in a hotel until then, he said.
"It's a great Jazzfest," said Jerry Tarantino, parking cars on the grounds of nearby Cabrini High School.

"Friday, we sold out all our spaces on the schoolyard and ballpark by noon," Tarantino said. "That has never happened before."

About 600 spaces are available for $25 a spot, he said, hoping that the ballpark, wet from a night of heavy rain, will dry out.

"We're having to turn away hundreds of cars, he said."