LET THE HEALING BEGIN; Second day of Jazzfest bursts with good times

*New Orleans Times-Picayune*

April 30, 2006

By Gwen Filosa

Lawrence Batiste carefully shopped for the perfect T-shirt Saturday to reflect his take on the first post-Katrina edition of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.

Batiste, a New Orleans native, drummer and storm survivor, finally chose one that paired a Jazzfest logo with a phrase about "the healing power of music," this year's festival slogan.

In a few hours, the 67-year-old would suit up with the Young Tuxedo Brass Band, something he has done since 1975, and perform at the Economy Hall Tent, the festival's cathedral for traditional jazz.

"See, it's about life and death. That's what we do with jazz funerals," Batiste said as revelers converged on the Fair Grounds for Day 2 of this year's festival. "We respect that body, we bring it home, and then we parade. It's about death and then rebirth. This is like a rebirth right here."

Saturday drew thick crowds to the Fair Grounds as the likes of hip-hop giant Juvenile and mainstream rock icon Dave Matthews were breathlessly awaited by a colorful crowd dressed in their freak- flag-flying best.

Jazzfest pulsed with signs of success, and the mood was an easygoing jubilance.

Walking the grounds was a carnival ride of outfit-gawking, with the constant possibility of stumbling across bursts of pure New Orleans culture. Big Chief Wallace Pardo Jr., in a triumphant canary-yellow Mardi Gras Indian suit, and his Golden Comanche tribe left passers-by marveling and joining in the tribe's mini-parade around the grounds.

Just as sure as cans of domestic beer would sell for $3 apiece, and that Clarence "Frogman" Henry would sing "Ain't Got No Home," and that the scent of incense and occasionally marijuana would waft through the air, so sure was it that Jazzfest would come through for hurricane-ravaged New Orleans, just as Mardi Gras did.

Among the wide-eyed tourists and the chair-carrying professional festival-goers were people such as Batiste, locals who truly know what it means to miss a pre-Katrina New Orleans.

Batiste lost everything material to Hurricane Katrina. His 9th Ward house on Almonaster Avenue was ruined by the same floodwaters that swallowed 80 percent of the city eight months ago. A group of musicians and artists helped him gut his house. He stays in a place on Spain Street today.
"I'm in love with New Orleans," Batiste said. "I was born in the same neighborhood as Louis Armstrong, at 1226 Gravier St. In 1949, I rode on a Zulu float. I met Louis Armstrong."

Katrina and the levee failures of Aug. 29 may have destroyed homes, belongings and vast stretches of the city, accordionist Dwayne Dopsie told the crowd at the Fais Do-Do stage.

"But it cannot take away our spirit," Dopsie said, moments before breaking into "Walking to New Orleans" with his Zydeco Hellraisers band. "You just remember that."

Crowds swelled as the hours ticked closer to the day's show- closing headliners, including zydeco king C.J. Chenier and blues great Etta James.

Organizers didn't release attendance figures. They said they would crunch the numbers after the festival's second and final weekend. But producer Quint Davis expressed confidence that the masses will continue to turn up.

"This is not less of a Jazzfest so far," Davis said. "If anything, it's more of a Jazzfest, with Dave (Matthews) and Bruce (Springsteen) and all."

Jazzfest this year can revitalize, and inform, the outside world's perception of post-Katrina New Orleans, Davis said.

"They are still showing footage of water, over and over again," he said. "People think New Orleans is still under water. The message Jazzfest sends is that we can have the funk Olympics in New Orleans, and it can happen on a full scale."

Batiste smiled gently at the sights and sounds of the festival Saturday.

They brought back childhood memories, of his mother taking the family to the 300 block of St. Charles Avenue to watch Carnival parades, Batiste said. "Every night," he said.

When he saw the marching bands' drummers, he knew what he wanted to be. As a boy, he made drumsticks out of broken chairs and beat on washtubs.

Troubled times are not for giving up, Batiste said.

"Our whole culture is about healing," he said. "The French have a saying: joie de vivre. That's what keeps us going, besides God."