Music Is a Major Key to Reviving the Musical City

Conference explores the role of the arts community—particularly jazz—in rebuilding New Orleans

By Fred A. Bernstein

The sounds of jazz raised the roof of Faculty House and other campus buildings during a three-day conference on the future of New Orleans, hosted by Columbia from Jan. 26–28.

The gathering focused on the importance of culture—particularly jazz—in rebuilding the city after Hurricane Katrina. Robert G. O’Meally, the director of the Center for Jazz Studies, said that New Orleans’ “musical culture itself contains the principles for reconstruction of the city: improvisation, resiliency, truth-telling and radical inclusiveness.”

O’Meally called the event, which he helped to organize, “the most important conference in the history of the Center. What is this institution,” he asked of Columbia.

“If it can’t address a crisis of this magnitude?” Conference participants—artists, activists and academics—argued that New Orleans can’t be rebuilt unless its culture is reconstituted. And that, they insisted, means the kind of culture that emerges from poor neighborhoods.

Kenneth Ferdinand, a New Orleans City planner, said, “One of the things people went to New Orleans for was spontaneity—the opportunity for chance meetings.” That spontaneity, he said, will be lost if only the wealthy sections of the city—which he called “the sliver on the river”—are rebuilt.

Jacques Etienne Morial, an eighth-generation New Orleanian, urged participants to oppose “plans to remake the city smaller and whiter, and in an image that disrespects our heritage, our culture.”

Morial urged everyone who lived in New Orleans before Katrina to make plans to vote in the city’s next election, scheduled for April 22. “This is a struggle for justice,” he said, “and history will be the judge.”

Many speakers focused on the psychological aftermath of Katrina. “My house was not flooded, but my soul was flooded, my heart was flooded,” said Jason Berry, a columnist for New Orleans Magazine and a documentary filmmaker.

“New Orleans is a place where grown men cry—where grown men ought to cry,” Ferdinand observed.

The suicide rate in New Orleans appears to be rising long after the floodwaters receded, according to several speakers. They described the effects on elderly people of being cut off from their communities, perhaps forever. And for all the tales of devastation, conference participants took time out for music, including rousing jam sessions. “Forgive us if, in the middle of all our trials and tribulations, we have a moment where we can be human and do the things we do,” Ferdinand said, summing up the prevailing sentiment.

If there was one thing every speaker agreed on, it was that New Orleans faced serious problems even before Katrina. “We know America,” he said, “by what happens in the rebuilding of New Orleans.”

As the conference opened, the New York Times reported that 80 percent of the African-Americans forced to leave New Orleans said that they would not return to the city. Juanita Brooks, an acclaimed vocalist, waxed eloquently on that point. Now living in New York, she said: “I’ve had an opportunity to leave Egypt. Why would I want to go back, unless Egypt is ready to receive me as an equal?”

The storm, she added, “happened long before Katrina.”

Some participants wondered what they could do for New Orleans from the relative safety of New York. Jude LaStrapes, a New Orleans native, said, “When you look around at this beautiful building, with the portraits [of Columbia presidents], you forget about the world that’s suffering.”

But Lionel McPhat, director of the University’s Urban Technical Assistance Project, pointed out that the social inequities laid bare by Katrina have parallels in Manhattan. “If something like Katrina happened here, it would expose the same disparities,” he cautioned.

Farah Jasmine Griffin, director of Columbia’s Institute for Research in African American Studies (which cosponsored the conference, along with the office of provost Alan Brinkley), argued that the media’s Katrina fatigue and urged participants to write to newspapers and TV stations, telling them, “We want you to hear more—not less—about New Orleans.”

Nick Spitzer, a folklorist who hosts American Routes, a weekly public radio program devoted to the music of the Gulf South, said, “Linking people’s stories about Katrina to music will defeat fatigue: Only music, I believe, can save the city.”

There were many moments of optimism. Michael White, a well-known jazz clarinetist, recalled his first gig after Katrina: “From the first note that I hit, I realized that the most valuable thing I had is not lost.”

Allen Toussaint, one of the most influential figures in New Orleans R&B, agreed: “I resolved really early on about Katrina, there’ll be some lemonade coming out of it. Like this right here,” he said, referring to the Columbia conference.

For the complete conference agenda, go to www.columbia.edu/cu/cjst/resources.html.

One of the conference’s many highlights was a performance by celebrated New Orleans vocalist Juanita Brooks.

George Lewis, Columbia’s Edwin Case Professor of Music and a MacArthur Fellow, treated conference participants to some improvised jazz.