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The Arts Come Marching In Again

By *Larry Blumenfeld*

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New Orleans

Once alight with bulbs that spelled out "Armstrong," the large steel archway above North Rampart Street, across from the venerable Donna's Bar & Grill, was dark much of the past decade, largely rusted. Beneath it, the main gate to a park named for trumpeter Louis Armstrong had been padlocked for more than three years, save for the occasional special event. Just inside, Congo Square -- where two centuries ago enslaved Africans and free people of color spent Sundays dancing and drumming to the bamboula rhythm, seeding the pulse of New Orleans jazz -- had been effectively off limits. The adjacent Mahalia Jackson Theater of the Performing Arts, home to opera and ballet performances for more than 30 years, sat empty and in need of repair after taking on 14 feet of water in 2005.

It would be hard to find a more potent symbol of the tenuous state of musical life and cultural history in a city largely defined by both. But earlier this month, shortly after dusk, Mayor C. Ray Nagin flipped a switch -- just a prop, it turned out, for dramatic effect -- and on went the lights of the arch and the park's streetlamps. As the Original Pin Stripe Band played "Bourbon Street Parade," a small mock second-line parade wound its way around a bronze statue of Armstrong and over to a sparkling Mahalia Jackson Theater for a free concert, the first in a series of events spanning 10 days and a broad range of performing arts.



Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra performing at the refurbished Mahalia Jackson Theater.

AP PHOTO/LOUISIANA PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA, JUDI BOTTONI

"The cultural arts of New Orleans are back bigger, better and stronger than ever before," Mayor Nagin had said at an afternoon press conference. "This is the start of what I predict will be a year of unprecedented construction in the city."

William Chrisman, the city's capital-projects administrator, estimated the theater renovation's cost at \$22 million, with the park restoration adding an additional \$5 million. FEMA, which initially denied funding, has pledged to reimburse \$9 million. John Quirk, who oversees the federally owned National Jazz Historical Park -- three leased acres within Armstrong Park -- hopes to complete his renovations late this year.

The opening concert was studded with local-hero performers, from singers Irma Thomas and Marva Wright to trumpeter Kermit Ruffins. Saturday's "Evening of Music and Dance" showcased the city's fine resident orchestra, highlighted with performances by violinist Itzhak Perlman and principal dancers from the New York City and San Francisco ballet companies. By

Sunday, Congo Square buzzed with young musicians and dancers awaiting their turns on the Mahalia Jackson stage, as presented by a half-dozen local arts-education organizations. A circle of drummers beat out their version of fanfare on African djembes. "This has been a long time coming, and it feels good," said drummer Luther Gray, whose Congo Square Foundation lobbied successfully to place the spot on the National Register of Historic Places in 1993.

The celebration spilled into the next week: A Tuesday orchestra concert paired pianist-songwriter Allen Toussaint's iconic hits with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony; a Friday tribute to gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, the theater's namesake, starred singer Yolanda Adams along with trumpeter Irvin Mayfield's New Orleans Jazz Orchestra. And when tenor Plácido Domingo topped the bill at a Sunday New Orleans Opera Association gala, history was referenced there too: New Orleans hosted the first documented opera performance in North America, in 1796. Though best known for its jazz, the city has long maintained enthusiastic audiences for classical music, opera and ballet, faithful through three years of compromised circumstances and venues.

The 32-acre Armstrong Park, whose design was inspired by Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens, opened in 1980. Within a decade it had fallen into disrepair. Not all New Orleans residents had celebrated its creation. The park was carved from residential streets in Tremé, which some consider the oldest African-American neighborhood in America and which has certainly been a hothouse of jazz culture for generations.

"The park has always been more about potential than reality," said Lolis Eric Elie, a columnist for the Times-Picayune and co-producer of the documentary "Faubourg Tremé: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans." "Now that it will be unlocked we're reminded of what it could be, but its reopening will not change daily life in the Tremé."

Will it alter the fortunes of New Orleans musicians? There's deep need among their ranks. In November, the nonprofit Sweet Home New Orleans issued a "State of New Orleans Culture" report estimating that three-quarters of the city's 4,500 culture-bearers have returned since Katrina. But as Musicians Union President "Deacon" John Moore said, "It ain't easy in the Big Easy." Since Katrina, music bookings are down by nearly half (45%), average wages by nearly one-fifth (18%). Meanwhile, costs of living have risen 11%.



A view of the historic Congo Square in Armstrong Park in New Orleans

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"The scarcity of audiences and the continuing challenges of resettling have limited musicians' opportunities to make a living," explained Sweet Home Director Jordan Hirsch. As pianist Davis Rogan put it: "The music is back 110%. But the audience is only 50% back."

"Historically, musicians have been taken for granted here because it's so common and pervasive," said Scott Aiges, a director at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation. "When we hear a brass band it's just another day. But these musicians are the working poor, making an average of \$21,000 a year." The foundation's efforts include programs promoting musicians to international festival producers and film music supervisors.

In November, Louisiana's Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu gathered representatives from 60 nations for

a "World Cultural Economic Forum," seeking to spearhead a statewide effort to use culture as an economic engine for recovery. Earlier this month, he announced the 2010 opening of a new jazz museum and theater on the site of a former U.S. Mint in New Orleans via a \$4 million collaboration between the state and the National Parks Service.

Many musicians look to the city for more support. Citing a 2008 city-sponsored economic impact study, Ernest Collins, arts and entertainment director for the Nagin administration, said: "If we say we're a music city, we need to make New Orleans more business-friendly in that market, and be more consistent in supporting the musicians and club owners -- this means rethinking things like zoning, parking, police protection."

That gate beneath the North Rampart Street arch is still not open on a daily basis. Yet Armstrong Park is as good a place as any to renew a focus on culture. As a gathering place for opera devotees and African drummers, bordered at its main entrance by a street separating the French Quarter from Tremé, the reopened park and the revitalized theater represent fresh chances to bridge the often-forbidding divide between the city's neighborhoods, and to revive the city's image as both performing-arts destination and sacred spot in the legacy of African-American culture.

Mr. Blumenfeld writes about jazz for the Journal.

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