

Time for Healing, Rebirth, Music

New Orleans Native and Jazz Great Irvin Mayfield Says:
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"It may be bad now, But it's going to be alright."

By Sue Mayfield-Geiger

NEW ORLEANS, A CITY STEEPED IN CULTURE WITH JAZZ AT ITS FOUNDATION, HAS ALWAYS BEEN SURROUNDED BY WATER. AFTER KATRINA, THESE TWO MAIN COMPONENTS STOOD STEADFAST. NEW ORLEANS IS ABOUT JAZZ; NEW ORLEANS IS ALSO ABOUT WATER. JAZZ ARTIST AND NATIVE NEW ORLEANEAN IRVIN MAYFIELD IS CONFIDENT THAT THESE TWO GREAT ELEMENTS WILL ONCE AGAIN SEEK BALANCE AND NEW ORLEANS WILL RISE TO ITS GREATEST HEIGHTS. HIS LIFE'S WORK IS DEDICATED TO THE HEALING AND THE PRESERVATION OF THE CITY HE LOVES AND ITS CULTURE.

One of the most recorded young jazz artists of his generation, Irvin Mayfield is adamant about many things. Although his life's passion is jazz, his heart holds significant places for the literary arts, visual arts, philosophy, democracy, culture and his birthplace – the city of New Orleans. At the age of 27, his articulation and wisdom seem a bit out of character for his boyish demeanor and stature, but his statements about life in general roll out of his mouth as smoothly and flawlessly as his trumpet playing.

Coming from a normal family background, he is the youngest of six, growing up all over New Orleans. In fact, he grew up in so many different parts of the city, that he experienced its culture first hand. "I grew up in so many sections of the city that I experienced New Orleans in a way that a lot of people (natives) did not," says Irvin. Although the first in his family to become a musician, Irvin says it is impossible to live in New Orleans and not be around music. "Everybody in New Orleans does something artistic - they play music, they sing; my mother was good at drawing really well. Many people in New Orleans will tell you they are not artists, but they really are."

Irvin knew at the age of 14 that he would make music and that it would be his profession. Spending time in Germany with a culture exchange program through his school, his exposure to music lead him to his "calling." After high school, Irvin was offered a full scholarship to Julliard in New York, but turned it down. By choice, he attended the University of New Orleans to find his "legs" and explore. After three semesters, he flunked out, went to New York and lived with well known jazz artist Wynton Marsalis for five years.

Irvin says, "While in New York, I developed my culture and character. I spent a lot of time reading, became a lover of the arts, fell in love with Faulkner, Hemingway, Yeats, Whitman, Ellison, Baldwin; the visual arts of Rodin, Picasso, Cézanne. I was exposed to jazz on a daily basis hanging out with Wynton, who was my mentor."

It wasn't long before a first album was cut: *Los Hombres Calientes*, co produced with Bill Summers. The album is a combination of New Orleans, Caribbean and African influences and won the 2002 Billboard Award of the year. Since that time, four volumes have been produced. Volume four (*Voodoo Dance*) was recorded not just in New Orleans, but Haiti, Trinidad, Cuba, and Jamaica. "We went into

places where even the natives would not go," Irvin says, "because we wanted to capture the spirit of their music." Next came a commission to do a project dedicated to the life works of jazz great, Gordon Parks, called *Half Past Autumn Suite*, which Parks wrote to commemorate Sept. 11.

Irvin has since founded the Institute of Jazz Culture and the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra (NOJO), a non-profit organization that promotes jazz performances, education and interpretation. "I wanted



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to develop something for people to know about jazz," Irvin says. "I want people to really understand jazz. Our mission is to have jazz be celebrated and sustained as a regular element of New Orleans." Members are recruited, but potential members attend workshops to play, teach or study with a particular individual. The workshops are free; NOJO only charges for concert admission.

"Basically, we were just getting starting when Katrina hit," Irvin reflects. "We've lost a lot, including instruments."

When Katrina hit, Irvin was not in New Orleans, but watched television coverage with concern. His father is still among the missing.

Upbeat and positive about moving on and
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Irvin Mayfield has recorded over nine albums and has appeared on or produced dozens of others. He performs solo and with his ensemble, the Irvin Mayfield Quintet. For information, see his website, www.irvinmayfield.com. For more information about the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra, or to make a contribution, contact www.thenojo.com.

is the time not for just the black leadership to step up, but for all leadership to step up. This is not just about maintaining the culture of New Orleans, but the culture of America. We have so many people displaced – it is a real concern – we need to have those people return back to their places to restore our culture - not just in New Orleans but America.

“Culture is about definition. You take away a house from somebody; you can take away his land, his clothing; but you cannot take away their culture. We have to reprioritize what’s important. The time is now. The time is now for us to finally get past this race issue. We have to deal with these issues with a certain level of maturity, and maturity means responsibility. We all have to take a part in fixing the problem whether you were part of causing the problem or not.”

Stating that the poor will have a hard time coming back to New Orleans, Irvin reminds us that many simply will not be able to afford it. He stresses how most of them could not evacuate; they had no means to evacuate. Most of them did not have a dollar in their pocket. “I see them shipping people off to Arizona – that’s too far,” states Irvin. “We do things as a country, but we don’t do things as a team. That’s what makes a football game so great – there is no “i” in team. Kenneth Clark wrote a great book called *What is a Masterpiece?* A masterpiece takes many of us. It is akin to an old jazz musician. An old jazz man understands responsibility. It is his responsibility to play his instrument with the other instruments. We all have to do our part to make the whole thing sound good. Then we get results.”

Married with two children, Irvin’s own home in New Orleans was in an area that sustained little damage. But his family members and friends were not so lucky. Irvin reflects: “I read something in a book by Lyndon Johnson who quoted Martin Luther King. Johnson didn’t really like King, but he understood that there was a magnitude to what King said: ‘Men have always come to me and ask me, when is that great time for our country going to come where all required will step up and make a difference, and I tell them, that time is now.’

“Now is the time,” says Irvin. “Now is the time.”

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rebuilding, Irvin says, “It’s a loss, but we will make it through. It’s like playing a horn and the whole philosophy of jazz - when something happens in your life, you have to look at it and say, well my husband died or I lost my job, my kids are flunking school – those are transitions that you have to deal with in life. Instead of running from them or wallowing in them, you have to figure it out. You must accept it and work through it.

“Everything relates back to jazz. The thing about jazz is that it is never easy. That’s the beauty of it. You are constantly readjusting yourself to get the best possible thing out of it that you can. That is what jazz is about. Jazz is a lot like democracy. You can never attain a perfect democracy, but we are a strong culture and we are going to heal. Jazz says, ‘it may be bad now, but it’s going to be alright.’

“Democracy and jazz are modern concepts. But, modern does not mean new. Modern means progressive – meaning we have to develop the best possible solutions. I was born in New Orleans; I will die in New Orleans. 99% of the people from New Orleans feel the same way. This city has a very clear plan of what they are going to try to attain. First they are going to come up with a dream; second they are going to come up with a plan – a plan how to make that dream happen. Now