

Something new from something old

Rebirth Brass Band honors its home city of New Orleans



Rebirth Brass Band

How wide is the appeal of New Orleans' favorite sons, the Rebirth Brass Band? In a speech commemorating the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, former President Barack Obama talked about looking forward to retirement so that he could finally see

the band play at its Tuesday night residency at the Maple Leaf Bar.

by
Robin Baciorek

Preview:
Rebirth Brass Band performs Sunday, March 10, 7:30 p.m.
TAJAC opens.
Tickets: \$15
(eventbrite.com)

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hymns, parade culture, the influence of the city's jazz greats (especially the Marsalis brothers), the burgeoning hip-hop scene—and distilled it into a sonic reflection of their musically diverse city.

Led by brothers Phillip and Keith Frazier (on tuba and bass drum, respectively), Rebirth also has spread the gospel beyond the Crescent City. They've spent decades touring extensively throughout the U.S. and Europe, taken home a Grammy (for Best

Regional Roots Music Album in 2012) and made several appearances in the HBO series *Treme*.

The pre-history started in 1983, when Phillip was still in high school and was asked to put together a few marching-band friends to perform for at a booster club event. Phillip and friends kept the new band going by busking on Bourbon Street for tips, playing casually under the name The Group.

"It was something to make a little extra money," Keith said during a recent phone interview.

Things evolved quickly—the guys started playing venues around town, the lineup changed with the addition of new members, including Keith (then in junior high), and the group became Rebirth Brass Band, a nod toward youth reviving brass and carrying on traditions.

"Rebirth is the rebirth of New Orleans," Keith said. "When we started playing, [people said], 'Why are these young guys trying to do this old music?' Because it's fun. Now there are like 20 or more brass bands, but a lot of guys are doing it because it's a fad. We did it when it wasn't popular. People respect that."

Rebirth's sound is further distinguished by the fact that it includes more than the typical brass standards. "Any genre you can think of we have incorporated into our music," Keith said. "Because the setup is horns, we can do almost any

genre. So, when we're traveling, we hear something and say, 'Hey, that was cool, let's try to incorporate that into what we're doing.' In the process of making a song, we're always thinking about what [it'll] sound like in a New Orleans kind of way. If you pay close attention to it, it's really new. It hasn't been done by a brass band before."

As the band evolved, the connections remained communal and familial (a majority of past and present members are related by blood or marriage).

"It's a very strong generational connection," Keith said. "People our age tell their kids about it like, 'Hey, when we were coming up in '83 we were listening to these guys.' There was no rap icon in the '80s in New Orleans. We were their rap icons. They looked up to us and saw us having some success with traveling, being played on the radio."

What started as casual has become a full-time job, but it's always remained an homage to the community, one that still feels new.

"It never really gets old because it's always like the first time," Keith said. "A lot of stuff we do—despite knowing the format of the song—[is] improvise on old songs. We'll create new out of something old, which is kind of like New Orleans; it's very old and historic, but there's always something new being created." □

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