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Native Music And Regular Gigs: A History Of The Maple Leaf Bar

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NATIVE MUSIC AND REGULAR GIGS:
A HISTORY OF THE MAPLE LEAF BAR

A Thesis Presented for the

Master of Arts
Southern Studies
Degree

University of Mississippi

Pieter Frank Kossen
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Abstract

The purpose of this work is to construct a history of the Maple Leaf Bar in New Orleans, Louisiana in order to determine its place and establish its importance in the musical history of New Orleans. Opened in early 1974, the Maple Leaf Bar is the oldest continually-functioning music club in the city of New Orleans outside of the French Quarter, and is accorded a share of the credit for the current popularity in New Orleans of the roots music of New Orleans and Louisiana. This will be accomplished by identifying and examining common traits the Maple Leaf Bar shares with prominent clubs from New Orleans’s history, and also by identifying traits that make the Maple Leaf Bar exceptional in this history. This work will utilize several oral history interviews of patrons and employees of the Maple Leaf Bar, as well as musicians who have performed there, along with extensive newspaper and magazine accounts and listings. This work will establish the significance of the Maple Leaf Bar as it relates to the musical history of New Orleans, Louisiana, and make a case for the importance of bars and nightclubs in the history of popular music.
This work is dedicated to my wife, Blair, and my parents, Tom and Connie.

Thank you for standing by me and putting up with me.
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Ch. 1- INTRODUCTION

On Sunday February 12, 2012, Rebirth Brass Band won the Grammy award for “Best Regional Roots Music Album” for their 2011 release Rebirth of New Orleans. They were the first New Orleans brass band to win the prestigious award from the Recording Academy and are still, to date, the only one that has. The band flew home to New Orleans the day after the ceremony and was greeted by an impromptu victory party in the baggage claim area of the Louis Armstrong International Airport. It was a triumphant and touching role-reversal for the band members. For years, Rebirth had themselves been one of the bands hired to perform at the airport for recently landed visitors to the Crescent City. This time it was their arrival that was serenaded. Band alumni Kermit Ruffins and Kenneth Terry were on hand with both the Baby Boyz and Kinfolk brass bands in tow. A few dozen other friends and fans were also there. Rebirth sousaphone player and co-leader Philip Fraizer was exuberant. “I never thought we’d have a band waiting for us!” he said to a reporter. “It was a big surprise, a big surprise!”

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Rebirth Brass Band formed in 1983 when its members were all still students at Joseph S. Clark High School in New Orleans’s Tremé neighborhood. They were one of the earliest groups to update the traditional brass band sound for contemporary audiences by adding a heavy dose of funk and elements of hip hop.\textsuperscript{2} Over the years, “Rebirth has gained an international reputation as the primary innovators of the brass band tradition,” according to anthropologist Matt Sakakeeny.\textsuperscript{3} In New Orleans, they are regarded simply as “an institution.” They earned this designation through years of relentless gigging all over the city, playing countless parades, second lines, and parties. It is also due, in no small part, to their nearly three decades-long relationship with a small music club located on Oak Street in the uptown neighborhood of Carrollton called the Maple Leaf Bar.

The Maple Leaf was opened in 1974 by six people who had no intention of opening a music club. Mostly academics and writers, they just wanted to open a bar where they could drink with their friends. But they decided to have a traditional jazz band play the opening night party. When the fledgling bar owners saw how much the crowd enjoyed the music, they decided to make it a regular feature. By the time the Rebirth Brass Band stepped on to the bar’s small stage, the Maple Leaf was the oldest music club in Uptown. It was also one of the very few that featured live music with a cover charge seven nights a week. Rebirth Brass Band played their first gig at

the Maple Leaf on Tuesday, August 7, 1990. With a few exceptions, they have been there every Tuesday night since.

It’s hard to overstate the significance of Rebirth’s Tuesday night gig at the Maple Leaf to the musical history of New Orleans. Sakakeeny says it is “the most renowned weekly gig on the New Orleans musical calendar.” The *Times-Picayune*, New Orleans’s leading newspaper, proclaimed it to be “a New Orleans musical touchstone,” and *The New York Times* once labeled it “one of the essentials of New Orleans music.” To some New Orleanians, this weekly ritual is much more than simply another estimable musical tradition in a city renowned for them. “Long before Katrina,” reflected Pulitzer Prize-winning *Times-Picayune* columnist Chris Rose, “the Rebirth shows at Maple Leaf were where I’d drop in from time to time to remind myself why I live here, why I love here. Why I am here.”

So, the day after Rebirth Brass Band returned to New Orleans with their shiny new Grammy statuette, they did what they always do on Tuesdays. They grabbed their horns and headed Uptown, this time taking along their little gilded gramophone with them. Oak Street welcomed them like conquering heroes.

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street in front of the Maple Leaf was closed down for a block party. Hundreds of people gathered in front of the club to celebrate with the band. Playing the most reliable gig in the city for more than twenty years means that a whole lot of people have spent a whole lot of Tuesday nights inside the tiny bar on Oak Street watching Rebirth Brass Band do their thing. For reasons that will be discussed shortly, that kind of prolonged exposure drenched in joy and sweat can’t help but form a powerful and cherished bond. The intimacy of the tiny Maple Leaf only reinforces this connection. Rebirth Tuesdays feel more like a party than a performance, a party that happens to be led by the guys with the horns.

The Maple Leaf Bar is housed in a two-story frame townhouse built in the late nineteenth century. It has a second-floor balcony overlooking Oak Street. On the night of the party, a banner was hung on across the front of the balcony that read:

Congratulations
To
Rebirth Brass Band
2012 Grammy Winners
New Orleans Best

Once they had all arrived, Rebirth went up on the balcony of the Maple Leaf. After basking in the adulation for a moment, they put their horns up to their lips and blasted out the first notes ever played in the city of New Orleans by a Grammy-winning brass band. They played a few songs, then went back downstairs to mingle with friends and fans before the show inside was due to start. Fans lined up to take

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pictures with the Grammy statue, and Rebirth gladly obliged. “It was like coming back home,” 10 Frazier recalled later.

The relationship between Rebirth Brass Band and the Maple Leaf Bar is unquestionably unique. Very few bands manage to stay together for multiple decades; even fewer clubs are able to keep their doors open that long. A twenty-seven year relationship between one band and one club, with sustained success for both parties, is by all accounts unprecedented in the city of New Orleans. 11 However, despite this singularity, the relationship between Rebirth Brass Band and the Maple Leaf is representative of the strong connections between the musicians of New Orleans and the clubs where they perform, and illustrative of the important role these clubs play in both the music of New Orleans and the lives of its musicians. For more than a hundred years, saloons, dance halls, bars, clubs, and “tonks” all over the city have been instrumental in the creation, growth, and evolution of the music of New Orleans. More than anywhere else, clubs are where the music of New Orleans lives.

Music occupies a central role in both the culture of the city of New Orleans and the cultural identity of New Orleanians. More than one observer has noted that it was the first city in America to build an opera house but the last to install a sewer

11 The Preservation Hall Jazz Band has been performing at Preservation Hall in the French Quarter since 1963, but that band is a creation of Preservation Hall and not an autonomous group in the way that Rebirth Brass Band is. Bruce Daigrepont has been hosting his Cajun Fais Do Do on Sunday evenings at Tipitina’s ever since he left the Maple Leaf in 1986, but has not had near the level of success or notoriety that Rebirth has achieved with their weekly Maple Leaf shows.
system. As the birthplace of jazz and an important center for early rhythm and blues, rock n’ roll, and funk, the tradition of homegrown music in New Orleans is entrenched and its legacy is expansive. Live performance has been and continues to be essential to the development and dissemination of the music of New Orleans. This may sound self-evident, especially concerning the era before widespread recorded sound, but it actually points to an important distinction between European and African musical traditions. In the European tradition, music is created and written down in isolation by a composer, performed in a concert hall by musicians, and enjoyed passively by the audience. The African tradition is oral, so there is no such thing as “written” or “composed” music. Outside of performance, there is no “music.” Additionally, in the African tradition the distinction between the performer and the audience is less pronounced, and often nonexistent. This has the effect of making the audience participants in the music’s creation and performance. In his 2007 book *Subversive Sounds*, Charles Hersch illustrates this dichotomy between the two traditions.

While audience members at European classical performances sit in quiet contemplation, Africans and African American dance, shake, tape their feet, clap their hands rhythmically, and cry out in response to the music. Musicians in turn react to listeners, playing louder or softer, with more or less rhythmic intensity, or even changing the beat, in order to keep the audience moving.

- Charles Hersch

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16 Hersch, *Subversive Sounds*, 137.
Professor of sociology and musicology Thomas Turino eschews cultural associations in his 2008 book *Music As Social Life: The Politics of Participation*, labeling these two types of performance as “presentational” and “participatory.” According to Turino, in “presentational” music there exists a clear distinction between performer and audience, while “participatory” music is organized around the idea that no such distinction exists.

Briefly defined, *participatory performance* is a special type of artistic practice in which there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles, and the primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in some performance role.

- *Thomas Turino*¹⁷

The indigenous music of New Orleans, particularly jazz, is a synthesis of African and European musical traditions. It isn’t one or the other. That said, many of the musicians throughout New Orleans’s history have been of African descent, and the music’s performance style is deeply rooted in the African tradition.¹⁸ New Orleans music is not *wholly* participatory as defined by Turino. The people on the stage with the instruments are clearly the performers; the people on the dance floor without instruments are obviously the audience. But both groups exert a distinct influence over the music. Both are essential for its performance.¹⁹ And in performance is where this music is created. It is honed, polished and perfected in front of crowds. A major innovation of early New Orleans music was its emphasis on soloing and improvisation, skills that are learned and refined through repeated

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performance. Crowd response is vital to this process. The musicians use the energy and enthusiasm of the audience to help determine where the music should go and how it should get there. In this sense, the music of New Orleans, in its purest form, exists only in performance. Certainly it can be captured on a recording. It can even be written down. But these are representations rather than equivalents of its live performance.

Today, live music is a major component of tourism, New Orleans’s second-largest industry. Music is part of the “holy trinity” of New Orleans cultural tourism, the other two being history and food. That live music is essential for tourism is self-evident; people don’t travel to New Orleans to buy sheet music or listen to records. The annual Jazz and Heritage Festival, a seven-day smorgasbord of live local and national music spread over consecutive weekends in April and May, boasts a yearly economic impact of $300 million, second only to the city’s famed Mardi Gras celebration. And Jazzfest is just the largest of several dozen festivals that take place in the city annually. While not all these festivals specifically celebrate the city’s musical traditions, almost all of them have at least one stage showcasing them.

*Louis Armstrong’s New Orleans* is music professor Thomas Brothers’s history of the world surrounding the birth and development of jazz. In this 2006 book, Brothers makes the case that it was its performance outdoors that was the most

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23 For a complete list, see: [http://www.neworleansonline.com/neworleans/festivals/festivals.html](http://www.neworleansonline.com/neworleans/festivals/festivals.html).
impactful on the sound and development of this new music, particularly in regards to the influence that the freedom of movement allowed by the parades had on the freedom inherent in the sound. But indoor performance spaces were also important. It was in bars and clubs all over the city where this music was performed night after night, in front of often-raucous crowds. It was in the saloons and “tonks” of the rough parts of town where the rowdy patrons would let the musicians know what they liked and what they did not in ways not so subtle. It was in these typically disreputable places where the music of New Orleans incubated and matured.

Most music histories focus on musicians and recordings; bars, nightclubs, and other performance spaces are often left out of the story. There are various possible explanations for this. Musicians and recordings are tangible; they can be spoken to, listened to, or somehow otherwise examined. They also last a lot longer than clubs, which as businesses tend to be finite. The most permanent part about clubs is the structures in which they are housed, and many of these structures—-in the case of rural juke joints, for example—were hardly permanent to begin with. Capitalism plays a role in this as well. It is often noted that marketers invented musical genres. Before there were record companies, there was no “blues” or “country;” it was all simply “music.” When business got involved, it was decided that categorizing music would make it easier to sell, which led to artificial distinctions

being introduced.\textsuperscript{26} This is unquestionably true, but record companies influence how people perceive music on a much deeper level than that. Turino highlights this influence while exploring the different ways in which undeveloped and advanced (which he calls “cosmopolitan”) civilizations appreciate and understand recorded sound.

In English the word \textit{music} is a noun, and cosmopolitans more generally tend to think of music as a thing- an identifiable art object that can be owned by its creators through copyrights and purchased by consumers. The strength and pervasiveness of the music industry and its mass-mediated products during the past century have helped create this habit of thought.

- Thomas Turino\textsuperscript{27}

Music history tends to conform to this industry notion of music and is structured accordingly. This is not an indictment of music historians; the musicians they document conform to the same perceptions. But the result is that performances outside the studio are not frequently considered integral to the narrative. When they do turn up, typically it is as a backdrop or setting, rather than a central focus of an examination.

There are notable exceptions. Sociology professor David Grazian's 2003 book \textit{Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs} is an in-depth study of the contemporary Chicago blues scene and the various methods the musicians and clubs employ attempting to convey “authenticity.”\textsuperscript{28} \textit{The Chitlin' Circuit And the Road to Rock 'n' Roll} is a 2011 history by Southern Studies alumnus Preston Lauterbach of the network of clubs and promoters that catered specifically to black audiences.

\textsuperscript{26} Elijah Wald, \textit{Escaping The Delta: Robert Johnson and The Invention of The Blues} (New York: Amistad, 2004), 4-7.
\textsuperscript{27} Turino, 24.
from the 1940’s through the 1970’s. But these books survey multiple venues as components of larger musical movements or organizational ideas. *Alive at The Village Vanguard: My Life In and Out of Jazz Time* by Lorraine Gordon and Barry Singer is somewhat of a history of the legendary New York City jazz spot, although this history is told inside the larger narrative of the life story of the club’s owner, Lorraine Gordon. Spencer Leigh’s 2008 book *The Cavern Club: Rise of The Beatles and Merseybeat* is a noteworthy examination of a single club, the infamous Cavern Club of Liverpool, England, where the Beatles found fame in the early sixties. But these two books only look sparingly into their shared characteristics with other venues or how these places fit in with larger local traditions of live music performance.

Another potential explanation for the exclusion of performance spaces from central narratives of music history is that interpreting these places falls outside the bounds of traditional history. The historical method is simply not sufficient for a full analysis of these subjects. A thorough study requires a sociological examination in addition to historical research. And sociologists have been slow to turn their focus toward the understanding of place. Sociologist Thomas F. Gieryn addressed this scholarly shortfall in a 2000 article for the journal *Annual Review of Sociology* titled “A Space for Place in Sociology.” The article is essentially a review of sociological literature that can be used to inform and shape an understanding of place. In the

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abstract Gieryn postulates that the reason that “...this research is seldom gathered up as a ‘sociology of place’” was a concern that doing so “...could ghettoize the subject as something of interest only to geographers, architects, or environmental historians.” It’s little wonder that performance spaces are a neglected area of study if one can get lost in an interdisciplinary maze simply figuring out how to research them.

But these places should be studied. Music is an intangible art form. Its primary existence is in performance. Woven throughout the musical history of New Orleans is a long and quasi-distinguished list of bars, clubs, and “tonks” that each played a vital role in the growth, development, and sustainment of the music of the city and the musicians who played it. Places with names like the Big 25 and the Dew Drop Inn were critical centers of musical incubation, collaboration, connection, and dissemination. This is not to imply that the clubs have shouldered this burden alone. That music can and will be performed almost anywhere at almost anytime is encoded into the DNA of the city. The tradition of street parades in New Orleans is as old as the music itself. But it was the clubs where the connection between performer and audience was the most intimate, where their effect on each other was the most pronounced, where creativity and experimentation were prized over familiarity and standardization, and where the music of New Orleans became the music of New Orleans, night after night after night.

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So how does one determine which clubs are important? What actually makes a place historically or culturally significant? These are difficult questions. Any answer involves a series of value judgments, the assumptions of which are almost always debatable. There has been some research into the question of determining historic significance. History education researcher Lis Cercadillo conducted a comparative study in the early 2000’s of students in England and Spain. She published her findings in 2006 in the journal *Teaching History*. In the article, Cercadillo identified seven different principles—contemporary, casual, pattern, symbolic, revelatory, and present—by which the students evaluated the significance of a historical figure, event, etc. Cercadillo’s results are informative, but as they are more focused on the perceptions of the students rather than the judgment of historians, their utility for this purpose is limited.

More helpful for making this kind of determination are the criteria set down by the official bodies that designate historical sites. The most expansive of these is United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which has the authority to designate World Heritage Sites. UNESCO uses a list of ten criteria to make this determination. To be eligible, a site must meet at least one of

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33 “Contemporary significance” considers “the degree to which [a historical figure, event, etc.] were considered significant at the time they were contemporary.” “Causal significance” considers “its importance as a cause of subsequent changes.” “Pattern significance” considers “whether or not it represented a moment in the past where a pattern was altered.” “Symbolic significance” considers “whether or not it represents a milestone in the general course of events.” “Revelatory significance” considers “whether or not it tells us something important about the past.” “Present significance” considers “how relevant it is to our contemporary concerns now (or in the future).”; Lis Cercadillo, “Maybe They Haven’t Decided Yet What Is Right: English and Spanish Perspectives on Teaching Historical Significance,” *Teaching History*, 125 (2006), 6-9.
them. Music clubs meet Criterion VI, which covers properties that are “directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.”

In the United States, the National Park Service (NPS) sets the criteria for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Most state historical preservation offices, including the Division of Historic Preservation in Louisiana’s Office of Cultural Development, defer to the NPS criteria when evaluating historical properties. The NPS designates four specific criteria that can be used to assess the historical significance of a particular location. These criteria represent the different types of historical values that can be present in properties. Here also a property must “be shown to be significant for one or more” of these criteria to be eligible for inclusion. Criterion A covers properties that “are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad pattern of history.” Criterion B covers properties that “are associated with the lives of significant persons in our past.” These first two criteria address what the NPS terms “associative” historical value and can be readily applied to prominent music clubs. Criterion C covers “design or construction” aspects of the property. Criterion D covers the “informational” value

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35 Department of The Interior, National Park Service, How To Apply The National Register Criteria For Evaluation bulletin, 2002, Part VI.
of properties that “have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important to history or prehistory.”

It is important to note that the NPS intends for these criteria to be used for historic properties only. They specifically note that “properties that have achieved significance within the past 50 years shall not be considered eligible for the National Register” except in the case of properties of “exceptional (national) importance.” However, this should not detract from their utility in assessing the significance of properties with more recent historical impact, such as the Maple Leaf Bar. In his textbook *Cultural and Heritage Tourism*, heritage tourism scholar Dallen J. Timothy notes, “Some of the world’s premier performing art centers, such as the Sydney Opera House and the Grand Ole Opry, have become important heritage sites in their own right, and performances that take place within them are an essential part of the world’s intangible artistic heritage... Assuming that heritage is based solely on remnants of a distant past illustrates a misunderstanding of cultural resources.” For the purposes of this study, the NPS criteria will be used as guidelines rather than hard and fast rules.

Another helpful source for making determinations about the historic importance of specific sites is the New Orleans Historic District Landmarks Commission, the municipal office that formally designates historic landmarks around the city. Much of the criteria of the Landmarks Commission are similar to

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36 Department of The Interior, National Park Service, *How To Apply The National Register Criteria For Evaluation* bulletin, 2002, Part VI.
37 Department of The Interior, National Park Service, *How To Apply The National Register Criteria For Evaluation* bulletin, 2002, Part II.
those of the NPS, but their first criterion casts a wider net than does the NPS and can inform this discussion. It states that properties are eligible for a Landmark designation if they “exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community.”

The Maple Leaf Bar is the oldest continually functioning music club in New Orleans outside of the French Quarter. It was one of the first clubs in the city to feature regular, local live music following a low period of the late 60's and early 70's. The Maple Leaf is widely regarded as having been instrumental in introducing both Cajun and Zydeco music into popularity in the city of New Orleans. In more recent times, a Mardi Gras krewe that runs out of the Maple Leaf known as the Krewe of OAK hosted the final parade in the city of New Orleans before hurricane Katrina. The Maple Leaf itself never closed in the aftermath of the storm, and hosted one of the first widely publicized post-storm live music performances. In the realm of letters, the Maple Leaf hosts one of the longest-running weekly poetry readings in the nation. Over the years, a number of notable poets and authors, such as Peabody Award-winning writer and commentator Andrei Codrescu and National Book Award winner Ellen Gilchrist, have been regular attendees at the Sunday afternoon readings.

In its forty-plus years, the small stage in the little bar on Oak Street has regularly featured dozens of musicians important to the history of the music of New Orleans.

40 This will be discussed later
Orleans and south Louisiana. Grammy award winners Jon Cleary and Rebirth Brass Band both rose to prominence in their careers while holding down a weekly spot at the Maple Leaf. Cajun band the Louisiana Aces, led by Louisiana Music Hall of Fame member and “Cajun Hank Williams” D.L. Menard, performed in 38 different countries on U.S. State Department tours as goodwill ambassadors of Cajun culture.\(^{42}\) Two-time Grammy award winner (and ten-time nominee) Beausoleil is a Louisiana Hall of Fame member and has been called “the world’s best-known and best-loved Cajun band.”\(^{43}\) Rockin’ Dopsie was a Louisiana Hall of Fame member and part of the first generation of bayou Creoles to record and popularize Zydeco music in the 1950’s.\(^{44}\) James Booker is a titan of New Orleans piano, regarded by his former pupil Harry Connick, Jr., as “the greatest ever.”\(^{45}\) Drummer Johnny Vidacovich has been hitting the skins professionally in New Orleans for more than five decades and has instructed generations of New Orleans drummers as a member of the faculty at Loyola University since 1982.\(^{46}\) George Porter, Jr. played bass in the

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To understand and assess the Maple Leaf’s place in New Orleans musical history, it is essential to understand the historical context. The history of music clubs in New Orleans can broadly be divided into three different time periods. These are not recognized by scholarship, but became evident from a survey of the history of live music in the city by the author. The first period began in the final decade of the nineteenth century and lasted until the 1920’s. It coincided with the existence of the red-light district known as Storyville and the birth of jazz. This was an era of dance halls, saloons, gambling dens, and ‘tonks, mostly located in official and unofficial vice districts, where musicians performed the raw, exciting new music to mostly lower class and underclass patrons. Frequently owned by criminals, these places were mostly segregated, although enforcement of these laws (and many others) was not as rigid as it would be in the decades to come.\footnote{Hersch, \textit{Subversive Sounds}, 75.} This period came to an end with the closing of Storyville, the opening of opportunities for musicians outside the Jim Crow South (and the transportation infrastructure to get them out), and the dwindling entertainment budgets that accompanied the onset of the Great Depression. The second period was the R&B era, which began in the years after the Second World War and lasted until the 1960’s. Clubs in this era were strictly segregated, and ranged from swanky white supper clubs to roughneck ‘tonks in black neighborhoods. Most featured entertainment such as dancing and comedy in
addition to music. This period came to an end because of desegregation, changing national musical tastes, and a series of vice raids conducted in the early 1960’s by a crusading District Attorney. The third period is the contemporary era, which started in the 1970’s with the beginning of the annual Jazz and Heritage Festival and the opening of clubs like the Maple Leaf and Tipitina’s. The contemporary era continues to this day. Even though the first two of these periods are identified with particular types of music, these designations should not be seen as stylistic. Indeed, New Orleans music history can be chopped up in several different ways, and none of these ways are likely leave the most recent four decades intact. Rather, these periods are defined by the deep lulls in the New Orleans live music scene that came between them, when clubs closed down and employment opportunities for musicians dried up.

In surveying this history, three characteristics emerge that distinguish the most significant and influential clubs in each era. The first is that these clubs provide local musicians with regular gigs in the form of weekly, and sometimes nightly, residencies. These jobs facilitate stability for musicians - eternal freelancers by trade - by providing not only steady work, but also (usually) steady pay. Brothers highlights these qualities when explaining the importance of the red-light Storyville district to the early days of jazz. “Storyville caused a huge spike in the music business during the 1910’s,” he writes. “Musicians were drawn to it for the simple reasons that the work was steady and the money was good. ‘The sporting district come to have all the best musicians because the pay was every night,’ said Big Eye
Louis Nelson.”\textsuperscript{49} For newcomers to the music industry, regular gigs can be a training ground where workplace skills are learned. For industry veterans, they can help keep rustiness or performance anxiety at bay. Additionally, gigging regularly in a single location allows artists to become acclimated to a performing space. Once they understand how a room sounds, they’ll know just how they should adjust their playing in order to sound their best. The freedom from concerns such as this can help nudge artists out of their comfort zone and inspire them to take risks. René Coman performed with the Iguanas at the Maple Leaf every Sunday night for five years.

Because you have so many of the variables removed, because you know the room, you know what it takes to do... You can try new stuff. You can hear well. You’re not fighting the room. You’re not fighting the job. So you can think, “Okay, let’s try this tune that we just haven’t ever played live before, we just rehearsed it.” [It's] just the regularity of always having that.

- René Coman\textsuperscript{50}

This comfort level also allows musicians to pay more attention to the tenor of the room, which in turn makes them better able to intuit and anticipate what the audiences will like and, more importantly, what they won’t. All of this works both ways, as the familiarity that the audiences establish with the performers and their repertoire leads to the crowds being more invested in the performances.\textsuperscript{51} And like Big Eyes Nelson said, regular employment also (usually) means regular pay, a small measure of financial security not always available to working musicians. This stability and consistency allows musicians to devote more of their concentration to the music itself, which in turn fosters artistic creation and growth.

\textsuperscript{49} Brothers, \textit{Louis Armstrong’s New Orleans}, 258.
\textsuperscript{50} René Coman, interview by author, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 2017.
\textsuperscript{51} Khris Royal, interview by author, New Orleans, Louisiana, May 2017.
The second characteristic of the important music clubs of New Orleans is that they attract audiences who are “into it.” These are often people who are well versed in the participatory nature of New Orleans music. For many of them, the participation is just as important as the music itself, if not more, because they understand the rewards that it can bring.\(^\text{52}\)

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\text{...[Participatory] music making leads to a special kind of concentration on the other people one is interacting with through sound and motion and on the activity in itself and for itself. This heightened concentration on the other participants is one reason that participatory music-dance is such a strong force for social bonding. It also leads to diminished self-consciousness, because (ideally) everyone present is similarly engaged.} \\
\text{- Thomas Turino}^{\text{53}}
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Additionally, these audiences embrace the soloing and improvisation as an essential element of the music. They expect it. To some extent, they demand it. This attitude creates a symbiotic relationship between the audience and the performer. The performer is rewarded by the audience for being creative and taking risks, and the audience is in turn rewarded by the performer creating something they have never heard before. Drummer Johnny Vidacovich has spent more than a decade leading a trio every Thursday night on the Maple Leaf stage. He likens it to watching an acrobat at the circus.

That’s one of the things that makes the Maple Leaf, too, is that it attracts an audience that will let you take chances, that wants you to take chances. It’s [like] the audience that can’t wait during a trapeze act at the circus, the part at the end of the trapeze where they take the net down and the guy does a thing and it’s like sometimes playing without a net... That’s what it reminds me of, the excitement that you get when you go on a trapeze with no net.

\text{- Johnny Vidacovich}^{\text{54}}

\(^{\text{53}}\) Turino, \textit{Music As Social Life}, 29.  
Interestingly, the integral nature of risk in this relationship between performer and crowd practically eliminates any chance that the highest quality musical performance will always result. Risk opens up the possibility of failure. But that’s okay, because these audiences aren’t concerned with musical perfection. According to Turino, it’s actually way down the list. “Participatory values, he explains, “are distinctive in that the success of a performance is more importantly judged by the degree and intensity of participation than by some abstract assessment of the musical sound quality.”\textsuperscript{55}

The third common characteristic of important music clubs in New Orleans is that they provide a space that is welcoming to musicians when they are not performing. These places give musicians chances to relax, and get to know and interact with one another in ways that might not be available to them otherwise. By watching each other play, they have the opportunity to see not only what their fellow musicians are doing, but also how they’re doing it. This allows them to learn from one another and share ideas. It also affords musicians a chance to, for lack of a better word, network. A visiting musician might sit in with that night’s performer and make a connection with other people on the stage, which can lead to new projects and collaborations. These are also places where a musician can pick up some work. If someone needs a drummer for a gig later in the week, the best place to find one is to go where the musicians congregate. The Dew Drop Inn on LaSalle Street was a storied black nightclub during the post-World War II R&B era. For a couple of decades, it basically served as a clubhouse for the musicians of the city of

\textsuperscript{55} Turino, \textit{Music As Social Life}, 33.
New Orleans. A hotel, restaurant, and nightclub, the Dew Drop was open 24 hours a day, and thus fit nicely with the schedules of working musicians. Practically every musician from the era remembers the place fondly. Guitarist Earl King is representative of these sentiments.

“We all got something out of the Dew Drop. It was an era. Man, if you wanted a band, you’d go ’round the Dew Drop and they were there. Like, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, man, you’d have thought it was the Union Hall. They should have made the Dew Drop the Union Hall upstairs because that’s how many they had down there. You could always find bands. I think this was what caused a lot of musicians to communicate because a lot of them would be around here everyday, and every weekend they used to cram round there. They had jam sessions and used to play with one another, everybody knew one another.”

- Earl King

Perhaps most importantly, these music clubs are where the seeds for the future are sewn and nurtured. New Orleans’s music history is veritably littered with stories of the younger generation sneaking into and lurking around clubs to watch their idols work. But not everybody had to sneak. Saxophonist Khris Royal was still in high school when trumpet player Maurice Brown invited him and his classmate (and future *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* bandleader) Jonathan Batiste to join his band one night on the Oak Street stage. Royal considers it his obligation to pay that forward.

“I like bringing in cats younger than me, like John Michael Bradford, who, his first time playing here was with me. It was the same thing as when I played with Maurice (Brown). [John Michael Bradford] was in high school, and I had him on the gigs, playing trumpet here with me, so there’s definitely younger kids that are going to be holding the torch... You gotta... I had older cats like Maurice and Leon and Steve, you know, showing me the ropes and bringing me along. That’s what it’s about. That’s how it’s passed on.”

- Khris Royal

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Beyond its resume and continuities with the past, there are also qualities that distinguish the Maple Leaf as singularly important, and not only secure its place in New Orleans music history, but also establish its prominent position in the landscape of clubs today. The Maple Leaf serves as a physical link to New Orleans’s musical past. The musicians that have performed on the stage over the years represent a full century of New Orleans musical experience, from Society Jazz Band cornetist Albert Walters, who performed in trumpeter Kid Howard’s band in the 1920’s, to James Booker sideman Red Tyler, an ace session saxophonist in the R&B era who played on recordings by Fats Domino and Little Richard, to current young musicians on-the-rise such as Royal. UNESCO counts performing arts spaces as part of what it calls the world’s “Intangible Cultural Heritage.” In the text of its 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO outlines the significance of these types of places: “This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.”58 There is an inherent impermanence to the live music business. Not only do the clubs not tend to last long, the music performed in them is gone as soon as it is created, remaining only in the memory of those who heard it. Within this temporary world, the Maple Leaf is a

beacon of constancy. It is a rare physical embodiment of the endurance and resiliency of the musical culture of which it is a part.

The Maple Leaf is equally important for its own role in the history of that culture as a showcase for the music of Louisiana. It was one of the first clubs in New Orleans to regularly feature the indigenous music of the state and one of the few to spotlight its varied strains. This concentration was mostly due to part-owner, manager, and booker John Parsons, whose impeccable ear was only matched by his indiscriminate love for the culture of south Louisiana. “[John Parsons] essentially brought Cajun and Zydeco music into the city and jazz uptown,” explained Jerry Brock, one of the founders of the community radio station WWOZ.59 Today, the indigenous music of Louisiana represents a major arm of the city’s lucrative tourism industry and is the nominal foundation of the massively popular Jazz and Heritage Festival. The Maple Leaf and John Parsons played a not insignificant role in this music’s initial rise to prominence. “John Parsons should get the credit he deserves for showcasing the music of New Orleans and South Louisiana,” says current Maple Leaf owner Hank Staples, “not only to the people of New Orleans but to people all over the country by doing it at the Leaf week-in and week-out.”60

Perhaps what is most significant about the Maple Leaf is its deep bond with the community, both the one to which it belongs and the one that it fosters within its walls. As a four-decade-old locally owned establishment with strong ties to a cherished element of the city’s culture, the Maple Leaf is a quasi-prominent feature

on the landscape of New Orleans. Current owner Hank Staples is a well-known business owner in town who is often quoted in local (and sometimes national) media. The bar also has deep ties to the Oak Street and Carrollton neighborhood that surrounds it. This locality is an important element of the community created inside the Maple Leaf. While it may be one of the most iconic and famous music clubs in the world, it is first and foremost a neighborhood bar. It’s open every day, and it has loyal regulars, some of whom have been coming there for decades. The weekly musical residencies not only add a rare touch of regularity to the lives of the musicians who perform them, they also give these musicians a place in this community. Musicians, employees, and patrons alike in interviews referred to the Maple Leaf as their “living room,” or often simply their “home.” It is this sense of community that forms the Maple Leaf’s strongest bonds with the deepest roots of New Orleans musical culture. In discussing the different ways that African music influenced the creation of jazz, Charles Hersch notes a particular West African cultural aesthetic. “In this aesthetic,” he explains, “art is inseparable from the community interactions of which it is a part… Given the central role of the community, West African-derived art forms also blur the distinction between artist and audience, making listeners as much a part of the performance as the musicians themselves.”61 In this regard, the people, both on stage and off, are as important to making the Maple Leaf a significant music club as is the music itself.

Again, almost none of this was on purpose. When Bill Odom, Judy Cooper, Tom Bethell, Jim Stratton, Carl Brown and John Parsons first decided to open a bar,

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61 Hersch, *Subversive Sounds*, 137.
they were looking to get away from the noisy college bars that populated the area.

“[We] wanted to open an intellectual place to come and get a drink,” Parsons later explained to a *Times-Picayune* reporter, “one that didn’t have a lot of noise…”

So what went wrong? That is what this paper will attempt to establish. Using historical and archival research, numerous oral history interviews, and personal observation, this work will attempt to document and analyze who and what were involved with the creation, growth, and success of this small music club in uptown New Orleans. It will examine the historical context to find its place in the historical narrative. It will examine the Maple Leaf’s commonalities with music clubs that have preceded it, and it will explore what makes it unique. Through an extended historical narrative, it will attempt to discern just what makes the Maple Leaf the Maple Leaf.

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A Note on Sources and Methods

Writing a history of a place like the Maple Leaf Bar presents interesting and amusing challenges for a researcher. The bulk of my research came from oral history interviews. I conducted a total of 39 interviews with 35 different subjects, including 11 musicians, 13 patrons, 7 employees, and 4 current and former owners. Most people were happy to sit down for an interview and gracious with their time. However many wanted to conduct their interview at the bar, usually on the back patio. Occasionally the patio was empty; often it was not. These distractions and interruptions undoubtedly hindered my ability to conduct calm, thoughtful interviews, and made the transcriptions occasionally chaotic. But the setting also relaxed people, and the intermittent interruptions made the interviews very much like casually conversing at a bar. Many subjects also consumed alcohol during the interviews, although none were intoxicated. This setting, while not ideal, was to some degree probably beneficial to this particular project.

Alcohol consumption however presented another challenge. The Maple Leaf is a bar; people are typically drinking whenever they’re there. Many of the best stories are the ones that the subjects can’t remember, or that they don’t want to talk about on the record. Also, the added element of time meant that recollections of the same event by different people could vary widely in both detail and substance. This was initially an aggravation. A good example of this problem is a story about Angelo, a man who owned a neighboring business on Oak Street called the White Pillars Emporium. White Pillars was an architectural salvage business; the new owners of the Maple Leaf procured materials from there when they were renovating the bar
before it opened. Angelo let them pay in beer. One day, Angelo salvaged a tavern; he put the bar from that tavern in the yard behind his store. That night, a couple of people snuck into Angelo’s yard, stole the bar, and brought it back to the Maple Leaf. Soon thereafter, a very upset Angelo appeared at the door of the Maple Leaf, asking why his bar was not in his yard. “We thought you threw it away,” came a reply. This story was first told to me by Jim Stratton, one of the original owners. Stratton told me that he was in New York City when it happened, and he had heard about it on a phone call. He then said that when he returned to New Orleans, everything had already been smoothed over, and Angelo had been back to the bar to drink and laugh about it. The next time I heard this story, Jim Stratton was one of the people who stole the bar from Angelo’s yard.

Again- at first this was an aggravation. But after a while, I realized that this was part and parcel of the subject matter and the type of sources with which I was working. In essence, the history of a place is a collection of moments. In describing what she loved about the Maple Leaf, Louisiana Poet Laureate Julie Kane touched on this. “The thing that was most magical about it were the musics, the poetry performances, the conversations that hung in the air for a moment and then vanished and were gone. That was the magical thing. It was those brilliant transitory moments.”

Moments only exist in people’s memories. And while some interview subjects’ memories were clearly better than others’, no subject’s memory should be considered any more or any less legitimate than any other subject’s memory. I soon realized that my research would not point me towards an unadulterated truth, but

63 Julie Kane, telephone interview with author, May 2017.
instead versions of events that were shaped by time and individuality. This resulted in my emphasizing the narrative over analytical conclusions. Contemporary newspaper and magazine listings could provide some verifiable details and help with dates, but it was up to my judgment as a researcher as to which version of events was ultimately used to shape the narrative. Sometimes I hedged and used varying accounts, such as the four different theories on when the opening night took place. Typically I just made a point to stay away from strongly declarative language, frequently identify whose version of events I was relating, and use words like “might,” “may,” and “probably.”
Ch. 2- SELLING A BAD IDEA

Originally, the Maple Leaf, as best as I know, was the idea and creation of Bill Odom, who was a professor or Slavic and Teutonic languages at Loyola University. He and Judy Cooper were the first people, but eventually they got a group together that included Tom Bethel, John Parsons, and Jim Stratton, and at the very last minute ... They didn't know about simple licensing requirements and about, for instance, providing some protection by separating your business entity from your personal entity. And somebody, one of them, said, "I know a lawyer." That lawyer was Carl Brown.

– Hank Staples

It started with a bad idea. Bill Odom wanted to open his own bar so that he and his buddies could have a place to drink. A professor of German by trade, Odom had no experience working in a bar, or in running a business of any kind. But he liked drinking in bars, and wanted his own place.

Odom was born in rural Jackson Parish in the north-central part of Louisiana, but raised in Baton Rouge. He earned his undergraduate degree in chemistry from L.S.U. and by the mid-sixties was married and living in New York City. He returned with his wife to Louisiana in 1970 and got a job as an instructor in the Modern Foreign Languages Department at Loyola University. He also enrolled in the graduate school at Tulane University. He received his PhD in German from Tulane in the spring of 1973 and was promoted to assistant professor at Loyola. He lived with his wife and young son on Hampson Street in the Carrollton neighborhood of uptown New Orleans, just a few blocks from the Mississippi River.

64 Hank Staples, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
65 “Loyola Adds 35 New Profs To Faculty List,” States-Item, Sept. 8, 1970.
Odom enjoyed bicycling around the neighborhood in the afternoons with his young son, who sat in a padded wooden box affixed to the handlebars that Odom’s father had built.\textsuperscript{66} He had been kicking around the notion of opening his own bar for a few years- since he lived in New York- but thus far it had remained just that: a notion. He was riding his bicycle down the deteriorating Oak Street commercial strip one summer afternoon when he saw it. 8316-18 Oak Street was a small double frame cottage divided into four mixed-use units. The first floor housed two shotgun-style commercial spaces. Two residential units were above them. One of the storefronts was empty; the other contained a small Salvation Army thrift store\textsuperscript{67} run by a little old lady who lived in one of the apartments upstairs.\textsuperscript{68} It couldn’t have looked like much. It still doesn’t. But Odom saw potential. Now he just needed some believers/conspirators. Ones with money.

I had a basic concept for what amounted to an ongoing party with cheap booze and live music; and each member of the team needed to find the concept sufficiently appealing to be willing to work at it, and work hard, for an unspecified period of time, until we could see what we could do next.

\textit{Bill Odom}\textsuperscript{69}

Tom Bethell was an Englishman and a writer, and a friend of Odom’s. Educated in Oxford, Bethell had come to the United States in 1966 to research traditional New Orleans jazz. His path took a sharp detour in 1967 when he joined the research team for New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison’s investigation into the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Bethell ultimately played a significant role.

\textsuperscript{66} Bill Odom, email message to author, June 2017.
\textsuperscript{67} Jeff Hannusch, “Maple Leaf Chalks Up 15 Years of Hometown Music,” \textit{Times-Picayune}, Feb. 24, 1989, Sec. L.
\textsuperscript{68} Judy Cooper, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, May 2017
\textsuperscript{69} Bill Odom, email message to author, May 2017.
in scuttling Garrison’s case. In the middle of the trial, he quit the District Attorney’s office and on his way out the door provided Garrison’s witness list to the defense. In Louisiana at the time, there was no law requiring discovery. Bethell’s betrayal led to the defense’s discrediting of prosecution witness Charles Spiesel on the stand, seen by many as the pivotal moment in the trial. Bethell would eventually resume his jazz studies and publish a book about clarinetist George Lewis in 1977. Somewhere in between, he bought what Bill Odom was selling.

Judy Cooper grew up in Memphis. She first came to New Orleans in 1955 as a freshman at Newcomb College, the coordinate woman’s college that was connected to Tulane University at the time. Upon graduation she moved to New York City to attend graduate school at Cornell. Within a year she had returned to New Orleans to pursue a PhD at Tulane. This time she stayed. New Orleans suited her, and Cooper has resided in the city ever since. She was teaching French at Loyola University when she met Bill Odom, a fellow faculty member in the language department. The two found that they had much in common, namely a mutual distaste for temperance and certain colleagues. They became fast friends.

He and I taught in the language department together and we formed an alliance because the other people in the department were somewhat problematic. He had a sailboat, and we would go sailing on Sunday. I remember that he had... some kind of music player. He would play Beethoven while we sailed the Pontchartrain drinking beer and commiserating about the Foreign Language Department. One fine day... I knew he was a drinker, and one day he said to me, "I have an idea for a bar in Uptown New Orleans. I’ve got this idea that if we could get a group together we could each put up not a large sum of money and start a bar that I think would be very popular."

At that time there were not a whole lot of bars. In fact, there was basically one, which was Jed's University Inn, which Odom frequented frequently. I didn’t so much. Part of his rationale was that there’s no place for us to go. There were a few other college bars, but in terms of bars that professors could go to also there wasn’t much. I said, “Well, that sounds pretty interesting. How much money you talking about?” He said, “$500.” And I said, “Well, yeah, I think I’ve got that much in my savings account.” I had a full time job so it didn’t sound too daunting. So I said, “Sure. Count me in.”

-Judy Cooper

The initial investment was later raised to $700. Neither Odom, nor Bethell, nor Cooper had ever before run a bar, or for that matter any type of business. None of them had ever even worked in a bar. This particular professional ineptitude would ultimately be shared by all of the original investors. This should not have sounded like a good idea to such a well-educated bunch. “[It was] a flight of fancy, yes,” remembers Cooper. “But luckily it worked.”

Anything must have sounded like a good idea to Jim Stratton at the time. Stratton lived in New York City; he was the only original investor who did not actually live in New Orleans. Technically, he never lived in New Orleans. Born and raised in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, Stratton had come to New York in 1961 by way of Oberlin College. (Mild irony: the town of Oberlin, Ohio was the birthplace of the Anti-Saloon League, one of the driving forces behind Prohibition74). The early sixties were a time of peacetime conscription, and Stratton was drafted into the Army shortly after he arrived in New York. For the next two years, he was stationed

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74 Daniel Okrent, Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition (New York: Scribner, 2010).
at Camp Leroy Johnson, a since-shuttered Army air base located along the Pontchartrain lakefront where the University of New Orleans stands today.\textsuperscript{75}

I was stationed in New Orleans at Camp Leroy Johnson. While I was there, I would work six days of work a week, and Saturday night, I would take a 10-cent ride on the Franklin South Line bus down to the French Quarter and drink until Monday morning, depending on what happened. It was always interesting. I befriended a whole bunch of wacky, interesting people, and a lot of them came from LSU in Baton Rouge... I was just a soldier. They thought that was curious. I would leave at the end of the morning, at 6:00 in the morning, and I'd go out to the Army base and work, and I'd come back. At one point, I averaged about an hour and a half sleep at night. I kept track. It was very bizarre.

\textit{- Jim Stratton}\textsuperscript{76}

It was through these “wacky, interesting people” that Stratton eventually met Bill Odom. He also met Suzanne Luke, a college friend of Odom’s that Stratton eventually married. Discharged from the Army in 1963, Stratton moved back to New York and found work with an arm United Press International (UPI). Like its rival the Associated Press, UPI was a subscription news service that provided news content to thousands of newspapers, magazines, and radio and television stations. An early adopter of the new medium of television, UPI partnered in the late forties with a major Hollywood studio to shoot newsreels and sell them to television stations around the country. The resulting company, United Press Movietone (UPMT), became a pioneer in the emerging field of newsreel syndication.\textsuperscript{77} By the early sixties they were the established leader in the field, and Jim Stratton hired on with them as a camera-wielding reporter.

While he missed the early era of innovation at UPMT, Stratton became a pioneer in his own right. In 1968 he moved into a large run-down commercial

\textsuperscript{75} Jim Stratton, telephone interview with author, April 2017.  
\textsuperscript{76} Jim Stratton, telephone interview with author, April 2017.  
\textsuperscript{77} Jim Stratton, telephone interview with author, April 2017.
structure on West Broadway in Lower Manhattan and began the arduous task of rehabilitating it into a livable space. Stratton was one of the first tenants of what would become known as the SoHo loft movement. These brave, crafty DIY urban trailblazers would transform the area of Manhattan south of Houston Street one abandoned building at a time. They were rewarded for their labors with spacious living quarters and low rent. Stratton spent almost five years converting his space into a livable loft. He and Suzanne got married and they had two children. Times were good.

But by the time he answered Bill Odom’s phone call in late 1973, the good times were over. Stratton’s wife wanted a divorce. She would be keeping the children. She also wanted him out of the loft— that he had only recently finished— as she was eager to move her new boyfriend in. Stratton was also about to lose his job. Fast-growing network news departments could shoot their own video; they did not need syndication services. UPMT was about to be sold to Coors Brewing Company and his job would be eliminated. Somewhere in the midst of all of this calamity, he had managed to slip a disc in his back.

- Jim Stratton

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78 Jim Stratton, telephone interview with author, April 2017.
79 Jim Stratton, telephone interview with author, April 2017.
80 Jim Stratton, telephone interview with author, April 2017.
Odom was actually putting together two groups of investors: one for the bar, and one to purchase the building. The building ownership group was half the size of the other group, and consisted of Odom, Stratton, and attorney Carl Brown. The buy-in for the bar was $700 apiece. The buy-in for the building ownership was higher and not so uniform. They bought the building for $40,600 with a down payment of $5,000 cash. Stratton remembers paying $1,000 for his share of the building.81 According to Hank, somehow attorney Carl Brown came away owning 50% of the building, which would provide fuel for decades of lawyer jokes, much to Brown’s consternation. Ringleader Bill Odom got 42.5%, and Stratton 7.5%.82 Odom formed two ownership corporations, one for the bar and one for the building. The former he named “Rosax,” after his father’s nickname in college.83 The latter he christened “EtOH”, the chemical symbol for ethyl alcohol (Odom’s undergraduate degree had been in chemistry). Both of these corporations are still in place today.83

John Parsons didn’t know Bill Odom, but they had a mutual friend. Parsons had grown up in New Orleans, and by 1973 he was in his mid-twenties and back living in the city after college. He spent his time forestalling graduate school by working towards a teaching certificate at UNO and taking odd jobs.84 Mostly he played a lot of chess. Parsons had learned the game at an early age, but it had fallen somewhere along the wayside of childhood. He picked it back up in college, but it would be at the Seven Seas bar on St. Philips Street in the French Quarter that a lifelong passion would take hold. The Seven Seas was the “chess bar” in the French

81 Jim Stratton, telephone interview with author, April 2017.
82 Hank Staples, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
83 Bill Odom, email message to author, May 2017.
84 John Parsons, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
Quarter. Bob Dylan had even played a few games there while he was in town for
Mardi Gras in 1964. There were two chess tables set up in the window, and many
of the more alcohol-inclined chess players in town liked to hang out there and play.
John Pitts was one of these players. It was Pitts that knew Odom, and knew that he
was looking for investors for his grand adventure uptown. Pitts thought Parsons
might make a good addition to the group. Not only did he have plenty of time on his
hands, Parsons also had a gaggle of chess-playing buddies friends who liked to
drink.

[Odom] was looking for investors in a bar on Oak Street. And many people turned
him down. So [Pitts] introduced me to Odom. I went over to his house one day. I met
him and Cooper... We just talked for a while... [He] just said he's got this building
here on Oak Street. He was waiting for the sale of it to come through. He was looking
for investors. He wanted to open up an “alternative” bar. He and Cooper were older
than me, [so were] Bethell and Brown. The other guy was Stratton. [Odom] was
looking for an alternative bar to the normal college bars where they have all of this...
commotion. He wanted a place for more intellectual people to drink. Where you
could talk. I had the chess angle. I say, "Yeah, I can bring some chess players.” By
that time I knew a bunch of the players. I thought it might work.

- John Parsons86

The final piece of the puzzle was an attorney named Carl Brown. At 41 years
of age, Brown was the oldest of the investment group. A veteran of the Korean War,
he had lived in New Orleans for most of his life. He had been a practicing attorney
for ten years when he crossed paths with Bill Odom. There was a necessity attached
to Odom’s pitch to Brown. Odom needed someone to help set up the corporations
and handle the legal paperwork, preferably someone more qualified at that than the
rest of them were at the bar business. Carl Brown would ultimately hold on to his

85 Jacob Maymudes, Victor Maymudes, Another Side of Bob Dylan: A Personal History
on The Road and Off The Tracks (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2014), 77.
shares of the Maple Leaf longer than any of the other original investors, relinquishing them only upon his death in 2011.

We couldn’t decide on a name. I came up with the Maple Leaf. Jelly Roll Morton claimed that the “Maple Leaf Rag”—New Orleans style, the way he played it, was the first real jazz piece. He told that to Alan Lomax. I had the Library of Congress recordings and I’d really been taken by Jelly Roll Morton. I wanted to call it The Maple Leaf Club. My partners said it sounded too exclusive so we decided on the Maple Leaf Bar. There was no real design. We were just a neighborhood bar, for ourselves mostly.

- Carl Brown

An advantage of having no real design was that there aren’t many details in which to get bogged down. Accordingly, the February 10, 1974 edition of the Times-Picayune carried a new business classified listing for the “Maple Leaf Club.” This moniker would persist, turning up occasionally in music listings and feature articles in the New Orleans papers through the late nineties. It can still be found today in various corners of cyberspace, mostly in band bios and travel writing. The earliest published record of the bar’s name is a classified notice in the October 9, 1973 edition of The States-Item announcing the application by the Rosax Corp. for a permit to sell alcohol at “The Maple Leaf.” Current online records of the Louisiana Office of Alcohol and Tobacco Control show the bar’s alcohol permit as issued to the

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91 “Business Personals,” States-Item, Oct. 9, 1973, Sec. C.
“Maple Leaf Club,” demonstrating the Maple Leaf’s harmony with the ethos of “the city that care forgot.”

The official story as told on the Maple Leaf’s website holds that the bar’s original name was the “Maple Leaf Rag Time Bar and Chess Club.” Outside of the official genesis story there is no record of this, with one curious exception. The Thursday, May 26, 1977 edition of the daily States-Item contains a listing for the first New Orleans art show for “Native son Johnny Tessier, a sculptor-artist.. Johnny, an LSU grad, will exhibit stone carvings, Plexiglas sculpture, bas-relief acrylic sculpture, pen and ink drawings, and acrylic paintings.” The show is scheduled to take place the following Sunday, May 30, from 1:30 p.m. through sundown at the “Mapleleaf Bar and Chess Club, 8316 Oak Street.”

More certain is that the bar’s official logo, still in use today, was cribbed from the cover of the first edition of the sheet music for the “Maple Leaf Rag.” Bethell had a copy.

Chess was an important attraction in the early days. To help lure John Parsons’ chess-playing buddies from their French Quarter haunt, several tables inlaid with chessboards were placed throughout the bar. Each table had been hand-made by nine-time Louisiana State Chess Champion Adrian McCauley. Only one of these tables remains, in the booth by the front window in the barroom. Chess pieces

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94 Hannusch, “Maple Leaf Chalks Up 15 Years of Hometown Music.”
95 John Parsons, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
were kept behind the bar and available upon request. They no longer keep full sets on hand, but current bartenders attest that there are still several pieces floating around back there.96

We did not start off as a music bar... [What] we kept saying was we'd like some place kind of like the Napoleon House where we would like to go and drink. Several different things that we discussed, possibilities, we discussed the possibility of having a pool table, but we rejected that because we thought it might bring a rougher clientele, so we decided not to have a pool table. Parsons was a chess player so we were very happy at the prospect that Parsons would bring his chess club to play at the Maple Leaf. We thought that would be a good vibe for the Leaf, and, in fact, in the beginning the chess table was in the front window so that they would be seen from the street playing chess.

The other thing we did, in terms of entertainment, was that we wanted a jukebox to play music, but we had heard that the... Was it TAC Amusement Company? Yeah, was mafia controlled, and we thought, "Do we really want to get involved with the mafia?" Odom said, "You know what? Why don't we just see if we can't buy a jukebox and then buy our own records and that way we can control what records are played on the jukebox?" So that's what we did.

- Judy Cooper97

TAC Amusement was widely rumored to be a front for New Orleans mob boss Carlos Marcello's gambling operations. Pinball machines that paid off like slots were common around New Orleans and south Louisiana at the time, and the word was that Marcello ran rigged machines through TAC.98 This decision to avoid such unnecessary entanglements would ultimately boost the new bar's reputation. The owners stocked the jukebox according to their own tastes, and the Maple Leaf quickly became known for having one of the best and most eclectic jukeboxes in town. The alternative weekly newspaper The Figaro noted this less than a month after the opening, beginning with bar's music listing with, "Aside from one of the

97 Judy Cooper, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
98 Marcello/TAC source
most highly-recommended jukeboxes in town, there’s also live music...”99 The Maple Leaf’s jukebox was declared a “Silver Star Winner” in an informal Times-Picayune survey of area jukeboxes called “Everything You Wanted To Know About Jukes” in October of 1976. It was a qualified win, but a win all the same.

MAPLE LEAF BAR, 8316 Oak – Where else in the city can you spend 50 cents to hear an assortment of music as wildly eclectic as Joe “Fingers” Carr, Tchaikovsky, the Johnny Dodds Washtub Band, Peter, Paul, and Mary, and the Silhouettes? The night we visited, it sounded like an icepick was doubling for the needle. The bartender promised the malady was only temporary.

- Times-Picayune “Lagniappe” 10/9-15/76100

A 1978 States-Item feature notes such wide-ranging selections as Beethoven’s Fifth, “Grandpa’s Spells” by Jelly Roll Morton, “Travelin’ Light” by Billie Holiday, “String of Pearls” by Glenn Miller, and “Rebecca Came Back From Mecca” by the New Leviathan Oriental Foxtrot Orchestra.101

The EtOH Corporation closed on the property at 8316 Oak Street on New Year’s Eve, 1973. Three weeks later, the Sunday Times-Picayune's weekly record of real estate transfers ran the curiously worded listing: “Mrs. Johanna S. Polchow et al to Etob Corp., Cambronne, Dante, Zimple (sic) and Oak Sts.; $40,600, terms.”102

The property bore little resemblance to the Maple Leaf of today except in dimension. Exactly what changes were made or how they were made depends on whom you ask, and when you ask them. The downstairs was partitioned into two sides (today, the barroom is on the right side, and the band room is on the left side) and completely separated by a solid wall. There may have been a wall across the back of

102 “Real Estate Transfers- Seventh District,” Times-Picayune, Jan. 20, 1974, Sec. 5.
the band room that corresponded with the wall at the end of the bar that houses the stock cabinets today. There was no stage. The men's room was in its present location, but configured differently as that space held both the men's and the women's room. What is presently the women's room was used for storage. There was an interior staircase to the upstairs apartments that came down near the door to the alley. The patio bar was on an actual patio. Where the patio is today was an overgrown yard with a couple of banana trees.

In addition to their lack of experience in operating a bar, the Maple Leaf's fledgling owners also shared a lack of experience with renovation or, really, construction of any kind, with one notable exception. Long-distance owner and urban frontiersman Jim Stratton had just spent five years converting part of a dilapidated old factory in lower Manhattan into a livable space fit for his family. Renovating the interior of 100+ year-old buildings was legitimately a skill set of his.

...I didn't know any of [the original investors] except for Bill at that point. I made arrangements. I was still limping around (from the slipped disc), but in January of ’74, I went down there to help build it. When I got there, I discovered that I had five partners who couldn't do anything except drink Budweiser. I’m sorry, that's an exaggeration. They could also drink Jax and Dixie. Being a loft tenant, I was an electrician, a carpenter. I'd worked for carpenters, plural. I knew electrical code for the city. I was a mason. I was all sorts of different things.

So I arrive in a place that's sort of like a teacher arriving in kindergarten, because there wasn't much that these people were doing. They were trying to hire people to come in and do it, but of course, the people who were hired were across the street at Jed's drinking, because those were the guys they knew who could do that sort of work. It was Larry, Curly, and Moe, but they were great people. It was great fun. ...I came in, and I was limping around because my back was still out, or still bad. It was put back together again. I was wearing a brace. John Parsons became my assistant, basically. He picked up things and moved them places and I hammered. Everybody else was hammered, I guess. The bar started before the bar started.

- Jim Stratton

103 Jim Stratton, telephone interview with author, April 2017.
Carl was good with a sledgehammer. He was a big guy, and they actually, some of the guys themselves, sledge hammered out the opening between the two sides.

- Judy Cooper104

That was basically Carl Brown and the other guys. They would drink a little while, they would take out a 16-pound hammer and go at the wall, and gradually they got through it. ...[It’s] true. They put in a lot of effort in doing that. It was a two-foot wall, a three-foot wall.

Yeah, but they hammered their way through while I was doing the other stuff. What was to become a bar had been a laundromat, so there were tubes on the wall, water lines along the wall. Carl Brown is an attorney and a little bit fearful of getting in trouble, and we were not filing any of the work we were doing. What work you would have to file, I guess, would be basically electrical and plumbing anyway, not the carpentry. He was a little concerned about it, so I ran the electrical lines through the old plumbing lines. It was in the old water lines that were empty, of course. I had pulled electrical wire through there where the bar was to be...

- Jim Stratton105

I remember the first day when we were in looking at the vacant side and Bill said, "I want your opinion about something." He says, "Look at these walls." And the walls were pressed tin. He said, "Should we think in terms of stripping that out?" And I looked at it and said, "I think it’s kind of charming. Why don’t we just leave it and paint it?" So that’s what we did. It became a big thing then which was quite lucky.

- Judy Cooper106

According to Parsons, the pressed tin stayed on the wall at the insistence of Carl Brown.107

On the next block of Oak Street towards Carrollton was an architectural salvage/antique store called the White Pillars Emporium. It was owned and operated by New Orleans native and junk lifer Angelo Ricca.108 Stratton says they were able to pick up some gingerbread trim and other decorative odds and ends from the White Pillars. Angelo let them pay in beer.109 At some point during the renovations, which appear to have taken place over the first couple of months of

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104 Judy Cooper, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
105 Jim Stratton, telephone interview with author, April 2017.
1974, Angelo salvaged a tavern. He put the bar from the tavern in the yard behind his store. One night in a not very neighborly move, a couple of guys (accounts differ as to just whom) slipped across the street, stole the bar out of the yard, and brought it back to the Maple Leaf. Not too much time passed that night before a clearly irritated Angelo was standing in the doorway of the Maple Leaf, asking why his bar wasn’t on his property. “We thought you were throwing it away,” was the purported response from the peanut gallery. Amazingly, their relationship remained cordial. Stratton remembers Angelo sitting at the bar and joking about it a short time later, likely with the thieves laughing along.\textsuperscript{110} One night someone nearby did legitimately throw away a large mirror - 4 feet by 8 feet - with a sizeable crack in it. They just left it on the street for the trash man. It was promptly scooped up and brought back to 8316 Oak Street. Predictably, the scavengers broke part of it off in transit. Stratton hid the jagged edge with some of the roof shingles was using to cover the wall behind the bar.

\begin{quote}
I did a lot of painting. We painted the ceiling. (Carl) Brown, actually, 400-pound guy, got up on the ladder and painted the ceiling. We would paint until midnight drinking beer and stuff, and then we would go out drinking again.
\textnormal{- John Parsons}\textsuperscript{111}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
I think we consulted on the colors and decided that dark red, we’d heard that red was good for restaurants, because it makes you thirsty and hungry. Isn’t that silly? But it looked okay...
\textnormal{- Judy Cooper}\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
I didn’t want to paint it red. I don’t know. I didn’t really… [The] silver ceiling worked very well. I don’t know. I don’t remember my thinking any color, I just didn’t like red particularly. But after all it didn’t matter. It’s probably for the better. Whatever.
\textnormal{- John Parsons}\textsuperscript{113}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{110} Jim Stratton, telephone interview with author, April 2017.
\textsuperscript{111} John Parsons, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
\textsuperscript{112} Judy Cooper, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
\textsuperscript{113} John Parsons, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
It is a testament to memory’s casual relationship with detail that people can’t seem to agree when opening night was, even though invitations with the date printed on them still exist. Of course trusting the obvious can be a sucker’s bet on Oak Street. The date most often ascribed to it, including on the bar’s website, is February 24, 1974. This was a Sunday, which seems an unlikely- but not unthinkable- night for a grand opening. In 2003 WWOZ co-founder Jerry Brock wrote a feature about the bar’s 30th anniversary for *Beat Street Magazine*. It began with the following sentences: “The Maple Leaf Bar celebrates its 30th birthday this January. Nobody seems to know or be sure of the exact opening date, but all involved agree that it was mid-January 1974.” Not everybody agrees. “It was August,” one interview subject stated with certainty.

As the big night approached (whenever that may have been), the novice bar owners decided they should have a test run beforehand to make sure they would be ready. It was, after all, everybody’s first time.

“We had a soft opening first. ...[We] just said, "Okay. Let's just open the doors before we have a grand opening. Let's open the doors and make sure we can do this." We had the soft opening, and this friend of Carl’s... Everybody knew his name. He was Joe somebody, who was kind of a big guy, and he had been around a lot helping out and what have you. He was our first customer, and he liked martinis, but the way he liked his martinis was that he would put a cocktail shaker on the bar and say, "Fill it with martinis." It was like, "Okay, Joe."”

- Judy Cooper

118 Judy Cooper, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
Joe’s martini would have to wait for Odom to run to the corner drugstore to buy some vermouth, which had been overlooked in their maiden attempt at stocking a bar. This would not be the last time somebody had to make a nighttime booze run while there were customers in the bar. Despite this inauspicious start, the new owners counted the night a success.

...At the end of that night when we were counting up the money, and it was a ridiculously small sum of money, but we thought, "Well, we could do this. We made enough money tonight that we can keep this open."

- Judy Cooper¹¹⁹

Something seminal and fortuitous may have also happened the night of the soft opening.

This guy walks up to the bar and I walk over and say, "Hi. What can I get you?" He says, "My name is Andrew Hall, and I am a musician. I’m a trumpeter and have a band. Wouldn't you all be interested in having a band for your grand opening?" I thought, "Well, hey, that doesn't sound like a bad idea." So again, I turned, "Hey, Odom. Come over here and talk to this guy." We decided, yes. Odom talked to him and his price was right and so we hired Andrew Hall to be the band on opening night. I think he became the regular Saturday night band. That was the first idea we'd had of having music.

- Judy Cooper¹²⁰

Andrew Hall remembers things differently. According to the bandleader, Tom Bethell had seen his band perform the previous New Year’s Eve at a party on Royal Street in the French Quarter. Like Bethell, Hall was a Brit whose passion for traditional jazz had lured him across the pond in hopes of linking up with some of its surviving performers. Hall’s Society Jazz Band played in the traditional style and over the years featured a number of musicians with ties to some of the earliest days of jazz. Hall says Bethell approached him at the New Year's Eve show about

¹¹⁹ Judy Cooper, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
¹²⁰ Judy Cooper, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
performing at the Maple Leaf’s grand opening, and he ventured up to Oak Street on the night of the soft opening to scout the room.

The official opening night was most likely held on February 23 of 1974, which is the date listed on a beat-up copy of the original invitation that was reproduced in Beat Street Magazine in 2003. It was also a Saturday night. The six owners invited friends, family, and anyone else they could think of, and everybody drank for free. It was likely a great party, evidenced by the fact that nobody seems to remember very much about it. “Crowded, lousy, loud, and fun,” recalls Judy Cooper. “It was a great party. It was, yeah... I couldn’t remember any specific things,” smiles John Parsons.

The initial gameplan was that at least one owner would be on premises every night tending bar. Each of them had one set night of the week to be there, and then an additional night every other week. In the early days, the owners paid themselves solely in tips. Arrangements were made for someone to cover for Stratton, who had gone back to New York.

It bears repeating that none of the owners had ever actually worked behind a bar, although they had all logged considerable time on the other side. Amazingly, this would be a common trait of Maple Leaf bartenders for years to come. Even today, current owner Hank Staples dismisses experience as an essential quality in a potential hire.

It worked for me... I got my first bartending job, I never tended bar. Bartending is not about mixing drinks, it's about dealing with people. If you can handle people,

122 Judy Cooper, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
especially when they’re intoxicated, you can be a good bartender. As far as the drinks go, you can learn that pretty quickly. There’s people who know how to make drinks and they should never be a bartender ever.

- Hank Staples

John Parsons downplays any difficulty in learning to bartend on the fly, and notes one employee who used her inexperience to her advantage.

Well, to learn how to tend bar, you can learn how to do it. Most, over 90% of the drinks you can learn in two weeks, just because that’s most of the orders. It’s when you get to the fancy stuff, which can take you a lifetime (to learn), but most of that stuff, we didn’t have ingredients for anyway. ...I made a good bloody Mary, but I was never a fast bartender, ...I was a good bartender. I was kind of meticulous and I would make people a good drink.

I had a girl, she had never tended bar before, and not only at that, but she didn’t speak English. She was one of the best bartenders I ever had. She was, like, oh, I don’t know how to make that. There would be five guys say, oh, this is what you do, get that bottle and oh, okay, okay, and then she learned how to speak English and tend bar.

- John Parsons

In a 1989 Times-Picayune article commemorating the Maple Leaf’s 15th birthday, Parsons joked about the attraction of the bar to the early crowds.

Even though we were one of the first Uptown clubs to regularly feature music, I think a lot of people came by to laugh at the owners. None of us knew anything about the bar business, but we were trying to mix drinks and act like we knew what we were doing.

- John Parsons

Whatever the reason, the place was a success right away. Business was so good that they soon required additional help. On busy nights two people were needed the front bar and one on the back (patio) bar. Tim Allspach, who was hired as a bartender in 1980 and would soon become a manager, describes preparing for a typical night shift.

Well I would always get here when you should get here. Make sure you’re set up and ready to go. Make sure you’ve got napkins, make sure you’ve got towels where you want them. Make sure that you... You know that the cooler is stocked up the way it’s

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125 John Parsons, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
126 Jeff Hannusch, “Maple Leaf Chalks Up 15 Years Of Hometown Music.”
supposed to be. Make sure there is liquor on the shelf, make sure the bar is ready to go. So that when that other person gets off, you're ready to go. [Don't come] in five minutes before the actual shift [was] the policy then was and I guess it still is now. Then it was half hour, but later it became fifteen minutes.

- Tim Allspach

The bar offered Miller Lite, Miller Dark, and Dixie on tap. Drafts were $.25, mixed drinks $.50. A pitcher of Dixie could be had for four bucks. Drinks were served in glass. For a while, they offered plates of sausage and crackers; there was a burner behind the bar to heat up the sausage. On a decent night, bartenders might ring up $100 in sales. Great nights might be $500 or higher. Employed bartenders (not owners) made two or three dollars an hour plus tips. For the first decade there were tables in what today is the band room, so there were also waitresses to serve and bus those tables. They earned $1 per hour plus tips. In addition that, employees could drink for free. They didn’t even have to wait until their shift ended. Drinking on the clock was common practice in New Orleans then. “It was a different time,” explains Staples. The results were predictable. “Needless to say, on a slow night, they’d all be drunk as skunks,” recalls Allspach.

The day shift was from 11 a.m. until 6 or 7 that evening. The night shift began whenever the day shift ended and lasted until everybody left. For years, the Maple Leaf would stay open every night until the last patron decided to go home. From the very beginning, the Maple Leaf was known as a place that was open very, very late. Early patrons included the owners’ friends, professors and students from

nearby Tulane and Loyola Universities, and people from the surrounding neighborhood.
Ch. 3- FIRST NOTES

The owners never intended for the Maple Leaf to be a music club. In fact, they specifically intended for the Maple Leaf to be a place where there was not a lot of noise. It was to be a place “just to drink and converse and be convivial,” explains Judy Cooper. “It was a talk bar,” Hank says flatly. Founders’ vision aside, another reason that they never intended to open a music club was that they probably had no idea that there might be a market for one (not that market considerations ever played much into their plans). In New Orleans in the mid-seventies, there weren’t really any music clubs, or not in today’s understanding of the term. After the triple punch of desegregation, changing national musical tastes, and Jim Garrison’s vice raids, New Orleans’s local live music landscape was for the most part barren. Most live music was confined to the French Quarter, in clubs such as Al Hirt’s and the Famous Door that catered to tourists by featuring traditional jazz.

Details about this time are scarce, as local newspapers the States-Item and the Times-Picayune did not start printing club listings until the beginning of 1975.

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133 John Parsons, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
136 “Calendar,” States-Item, Jan. 11, 1975, Lagniappe.
and the end of 1978, respectively, and these were scattershot and incomplete until the end of the decade. Even if listings had run and been better cultivated, it is doubtful that many of the smaller clubs—especially those in black neighborhoods—would have bothered or even thought to submit listings to the major city paper. An alternative newspaper called *The Figaro*, published weekly from 1972 until 1981, carried a small selection of club listings, but they were also incomplete.  

Bandleader Andrew Hall certainly had his doubts about how he and his band would go over. “I could see a traditional jazz band working on Bourbon Street, because in the mid-70’s there were like 15 jazz clubs on Bourbon,” he told a reporter later. “But I didn’t know if it would work in a neighborhood uptown. To me, it seemed like a terrible gamble to take on a band like mine.” When Hall ventured up to Oak Street to scope out the room, he remembers that, “[it] was as far out of the French Quarter that I had ever been.” He was so unsure of the prospects, he told

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138 Media NOLA, “The Figaro,” *Tulane University*, May 4, 2012, [http://medianola.org/discover/place/176](http://medianola.org/discover/place/176); The March 20 edition of *The Figaro* from 1974 lists eleven such establishments: The Fairmont Hotel (formerly the Roosevelt Hotel, home to The Cave, considered by many to the first nightclub in the United States) featured music in the Fairmont Court Lounge and in its swanky throwback supper club The Blue Room; the 544 Club on Bourbon St.; The Horse Lounge at 810 N. Claiborne; LeCentime, a supper club in the Le Pavillion hotel on Poydras in the CBD; Lu and Charlie’s, an important outpost of modern jazz in New Orleans that opened in 1972; the Maple Leaf; the Quarter Note Lounge, a rock n’ roll club in the suburban Metairie nightclub district known as Fat City; Sancho Panza, another Fat City club; The Sands, another swanky throwback supper club on Jefferson Highway that was one of the few survivors from the R&B era; The Steamer President, a riverboat moored at the foot of Canal that offered nightly musical cruises from 8:30 until midnight; and Sylvia’s Lounge, a predominantly black nightclub uptown on Freret near Napoleon. “Rock, Jazz, Pop,” *The Figaro*, March 20, 1974.  
139 Spera, “Long Live The Leaf.”  
the Maple Leaf’s owners, “If it doesn’t work after the first set, you don’t even have to pay us.”  

But it did work. The fledgling bar owners loved the music. More importantly, so did the opening night crowd. After the first night’s success, the owners decided to invite the Society Jazz Band back for the following Saturday night. It was also a success. The Society Jazz Band would return to Maple Leaf stage every Saturday night for the next seven years.

The Society Jazz Band was significant to the Maple Leaf for more than just being first. Hall had started the band for the express purpose of performing with some of the surviving players from the earliest days of jazz. Through the years, the Society Jazz Band featured several musicians with remarkable New Orleans musical pedigrees. Saxophonist Teddy Johnson was born in 1911 and performed with Willie “Bunk” Johnson around southwest Louisiana and southeast Texas. In his teens, Bunk Johnson had played second cornet behind pioneering jazz trumpeter Charles “Buddy” Bolden. Teddy Johnson also spent the thirties playing West Bank clubs like Speck’s Moulin Rouge in Marrero and Old Fireman’s Hall in Westwego with trumpeter “Kid” Thomas Valentine. “Kid Thomas,” as he was known, was “often said to be one of the last original players of the pre-Louis Armstrong New Orleans

141 Spera, “Long Live The Leaf.”
142 Mazza, “Society Jazz Band.”
trumpet style.” Bassist Melvin Yancy performed with the George Lewis Band at the El Morocco club on Bourbon Street in the nineteen-fifties. Lewis, born in 1900, had performed with trombonist Kid Ory, whose Storyville-era band had included both Joe “King” Oliver and Louis Armstrong. Yancy also performed for a time in Dave Bartholomew’s band. Bartholomew was one of the bandleaders at the Dew Drop Inn in the nineteen-fifties; he was also the producer of Fats Domino’s first recordings at Imperial Records and is a member of the Rock n’ Roll Hall of Fame. Guitarist Justin Adams occasionally played sessions in Cosimo Matassa’s studio band, which was directed by Bartholomew. Adams’s guitar can be heard on the perennial Mardi Gras hit “Carnival Time,” by Al “Carnival Time” Johnson and on Little Richard’s original recording of “Tutti Frutti.” “A lot of the Preservation Hall musicians used to come play as well,” Hall later told a reporter. “The Maple Leaf reminded them of the old dance halls. It was a great atmosphere to work in.”

Hall must have liked the room, because he participated in (and presumably facilitated) the recording of an album at the Maple Leaf less than two months after the club first opened its doors. None of the interview subjects remember this

150 Spera, “Long Live The Leaf.”
recording, or were even aware of it, but there exists an album from 1974 on GBH Records by trumpeter Tony Fougerat titled *At The ‘Maple Leaf Bar’*. The back cover states that the album was “Recorded Thursday 18 April 1974, at the ‘Maple Leaf Bar’ New Orleans, Louisiana.” Also on the back cover are two photographs of Fougerat and the musicians on the recording, one out in front of the club and one on the stage.¹⁵¹ Fougerat was a white musician born in New Orleans in 1900. He told a Hogan Jazz Archive interviewer in 1960 that in his youth he saw Louis Armstrong play with King Oliver’s band at Tom Anderson’s saloon in Storyville.¹⁵² While still in his teens, Fougerat played with Papa Jack Laine, who is regarded as the “father of white jazz.”¹⁵³ In the twenties Fougerat traveled with a tent show as part of the Paul English Players, which also included “The Singing Brakeman” Jimmie Rodgers. Fougerat is believed to have accompanied Rodgers on his recordings of “Desert Blues” and “Any Old Time” in 1929.¹⁵⁴ Eventually, Fougerat moved back to New Orleans and got a straight job selling insurance. He performed regularly at Munster’s in the Irish Channel neighborhood for much of the sixties and seventies. Assumedly it is his band from Munster’s that he performs with on this album, which includes Andrew Hall on drums and Fougerat’s longtime tenor saxophonist Jimmy Geary and trombonist Joe “Red” Margiotta. Margiotta was a unique figure. He was missing most of his right arm, including his elbow. In order to perform, he would strap the bell of

¹⁵¹ Tony Fougerat, *At The ‘Maple Leaf Bar’*, GHB Records, 1974, GHB-147, lp.
his trombone to the stump and move the slide with his left hand.\textsuperscript{155} It is not known whether or not Fougerat actually performed at night for a Maple Leaf crowd; no available records say he did. The album stands alone as proof of his appearance on Oak Street. It is also a testament to the wide assortment of historical experience that graced the Maple Leaf stage in those first few years.

It didn’t take long for one night of the week to become two. By March of 1974, the Maple Leaf offered bluegrass on Sunday evenings, performed initially by the True Bluegrass Boys.\textsuperscript{156} The inexperienced business owners soon realized that they had stumbled upon two underserved musical markets. There was a demand market; lots of people wanted a place to enjoy live music. But they also found a supply market; lots of musicians needed a place to play. “Well, we started something,” remembers Parsons. “All these bands just started coming and applying for work. They liked the place and they wanted to work, so occasionally we would try them.”\textsuperscript{157}

One band that came to audition in the summer of 1974 was Kurt Kasson and the Wheeler Sisters. Reggie Scanlan played bass for the band and accompanied Kasson to the audition. Also in the group were Bruce Raeburn on the drums and sisters Joellen and Lisa Wheeler on vocals. The band had been playing the French Quarter regularly for several months and were really “looking to get off Bourbon Street.”\textsuperscript{158} The bar was initially reluctant to book them because of Scanlan’s electric bass. Thus far, only unamplified instruments had been used in the small club. But

\textsuperscript{155} Tony Fougerat, \textit{At The ’Maple Leaf Bar’}, GHB Records, 1974, GHB-147, lp.
\textsuperscript{156} “Rock, Jazz, Pop,” \textit{The Figaro}, March 20, 1974.
\textsuperscript{157} John Parsons, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
\textsuperscript{158} Reggie Scanlan, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 2017.
Scanlan went out of a limb and convinced the owners to give them a chance. In doing so, Scanlan inadvertently set a precedent that would affect both the future of the Maple Leaf and his relationship with it.

[Kurt] goes over there to try and get a gig and I went with him. And I forget who was running the bar then... I forget this name... he goes, “Yeah it’d be nice but we don’t allow electric instruments in here.” And I said, “Well, I’ll tell you what... How about we come in and play, and if it’s too loud...” And Kurt’s standing there like, “Wait, what?” I said, “If it’s too loud, you can stop us in the middle of the song and fire us. How about that?” ...Kurt’s standing there like, “What the fuck are you doing?” I said, “You can fire us in the middle of a song. The audience will love it; they’ll be cool. How about that?” “All right, we’ll do that.” So, that’s how I was the first person to play electric instruments at the Maple Leaf.

- Reggie Scanlan

Kurt Kasson and the Wheeler Sisters played an upbeat style of music that was similar to Dan Hicks and the Hot Licks, a Bay Area group that played a hybrid of folk and swing and featured (often funny) vocal interplay between the male and female singers. According to Scanlan, Kasson was an “East Coast folkie guy” and “a good finger-style guitar player.” Bruce Raeburn noted that there was a “Jim Kweskin Jug Band component” and some elements of bluegrass in the group’s sound. “It was within the realm of the type of music that the Maple Leaf put on,” explains Scanlan. “So if you liked the little Dixieland band they’d have on there sometimes, if you liked the bluegrass bands that they would put in there, we kinda fit in there. It was close enough to what people expected in there and they liked it.”

It was a diverse repertoire, but one that was perfectly suited for a drinking, dancing, get-down crowd. Particularly Dan Hicks material like “Pay Day”... Some Jerry Jeff Walker, I think. “Why Don’t We Get Drunk And Screw?” always went over big.

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Everyone knew the lyrics, we had the crowd thing going with sing-along. I think the repertoire was well suited to building the Maple Leaf as a place to have a good time.  

- Bruce Raeburn

It might not have been just the band’s repertoire that attracted the crowds.

Well, Joellen and Lisa Wheeler were both really beautiful and could sing. Guys were panting at the bit to get to these women, so I think that’s why we packed the place. People liked the music and there were women who came... but I’d say the sex appeal aspect of it with the Wheeler Sisters was a very important drawing card for that band and really helped them gain some popularity. The place was jammed every Thursday night.

- Bruce Raeburn

John Parsons is more succinct. “They packed ‘em in on Thursdays,” he remembers. “I just remember standing [there] that first time they played and I looked at ‘em and I said, ‘Damn, these people are eating this with a spoon.’ Yeah, so they played regularly.” Interestingly, much like the Society Jazz Band linked the Maple Leaf with New Orleans’s musical past, Kurt Kasson and the Wheeler Sisters would prove to be a connection to its future. Reggie Scanlan went on to play bass for the Radiators, members of the Louisiana Music Hall of Fame and one of New Orleans’s most popular rock n’ roll bands. Drummer Bruce Raeburn performed with a number of other bands- notably the Pfister Sisters- and would become a jazz educator and the long-time curator of the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University.

Just as they hadn’t set out to open a music club, the owners never intended for the Maple Leaf to feature any particular kind of music. While the club would evolve into a showcase for the indigenous music of Louisiana, for the first few years an eclectic variety of music was performed on the Oak Street stage. The bookings reflected the diverse interests of the bar’s intellectual owners. Parsons remembers

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adding a ragtime piano player on Monday nights because Brown and Bethell were both fans of ragtime (and the bar, as has been noted, took its own name from Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag”). Even classical music was welcomed. An entertainment calendar in the April 5, 1975 edition of the *States-Item* lists a performance that afternoon from 2-4 by the “Baroak String Quartet.” It reads, “That’s baroque music, by the way, in a bar on Oak Street. Get it? A regular Sunday feature at the uptown spot.” Not only was the Maple Leaf able to draw from the deep pool of talented musicians in and around New Orleans, according to Carl Brown they brought in performers from far outside the region. “We had a lot of people come in, folk bands like the High Woods String Band from Upstate New York and a number of European jazz bands played here for a while; some real good ones from German, Sweden, and Holland.”

At first there was no cover charge to get into the Maple Leaf on nights when they had music. They would just raise the price of booze by twenty-five percent. At the time in New Orleans, paying a cover charge for local live music was unheard of. Future Jazz and Heritage Festival executive producer Quint Davis managed New Orleans piano legend Professor Longhair’s re-emerging career during the seventies. “We booked a few concert jobs around town like at the Warehouse, but they weren’t too frequent,” he told writer Jeff Hannusch. “‘Fess was still playing cards to get rent money... The first club stuff was Jed’s. Jed Palmer was the first person to book him at

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166 John Parsons, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
Mardi Gras and ask a dollar at the door. See, people in New Orleans just never paid a cover charge to see music.” 170 This was unsurprisingly not a popular decision. “Oh, I had some irate customers!,” Palmer told Tim Lyman in *Wavelength* magazine in 1981. “People throwing beer cans at the place, screaming, ‘You can’t charge a cover at a New Orleans bar!’ It took them a year to stop vehemently protesting the cover charge.” 171

The new neighbors across the street soon followed Palmer’s lead. According to John Parsons, it was Tom Bethell who one night said to his partners, “It’s time to stop being the good guys of Oak Street.” 172 Saturday nights with the Society Jazz Band would remain free, but the Maple Leaf began charging a cover for most other live music sometime during year two. It remains standard practice today. There is an implicit endorsement of a musician’s skill when a bar charges a cover: this musicians is so talented, they’re worth paying money to see. By charging a cover for all the music they present, the Maple Leaf also positions itself as a place that consistently offers music that is worth paying money to see. Bartender Ragan Wicker sees the practice not only as an endorsement of what the Maple Leaf has to offer, but also as a key to its longevity.

> We are very strict about not hiring bands that play somewhere free any other night of the week because we want to make sure that... what we’re offering is something [that is] - I wouldn’t say unique- but it is worth taking energy and putting energy into money and traveling Uptown to come see music. If they can see... the same person free another night, there’s no [way] to make the place viable.

- Ragan Wicker 173

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Whether or not a club charges a cover correlates directly with how- and how much- a musician or group gets paid for a performance. In his 2013 book *Roll With It: Brass Bands In The Streets of New Orleans*, anthropologist Matt Sakakeeny discusses “the role of artists as workers,” noting that traditionally New Orleans musicians have viewed themselves as skilled laborers rather than pure artists, on par with occupations such as longshoring and masonry. “Of course,” continues Sakakeeny, “in the early twenty-first century the availability of skilled craft jobs in New Orleans has diminished and the largest sector in New Orleans is the service economy.”

Addressing the role of musicians in the cultural tourism business of the city, he quotes New Orleans Musicians’ Clinic founder Dr. Johann Bultman who points out that, “...many, many times the musician is the last to be paid, paid as an afterthought, and isn't appreciated as part of our cultural economy.”

Today cover charges are standard at clubs throughout New Orleans, although many places with heavy tourist traffic still do not charge one. Musicians are paid in a variety of ways: sometimes a cut of the door, sometimes a cut of the bar, sometimes a nominal flat rate (and the accompanying tip jar). Implicit in all of these arrangements is the importance of crowd size. Musicians never know how much money they will make when the gig starts, and their pay is often dependent on the whims of the bar-going public that particular night. Saxophonist Khris Royal explains how this system makes the job of the musician more difficult.

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175 Skakeeny, *Roll With It*, 84-85.
[When you] have to pass the tip jar around and beg people to give you money for something like... It’s art. You’re expressing yourself. I’m giving from my soul, so you’ve got to be built back up. So if you’re already playing for people who are drunk and not paying attention, it’s extra hard when they’re not even paying you.

- Khris Royal

The Maple Leaf has always offered musicians a guaranteed amount of money.

“The Maple Leaf always has guarantees,” explains drummer Derrick Freeman. “They’re not always large, but they’re always there.” In fact, seven of the musicians interviewed mentioned the Maple Leaf’s guarantee. Bruce Raeburn, who began playing at the Maple Leaf with Kurt Kasson in the summer of 1974, remembers, “It was a decent gig in terms of money. I don’t remember what we made but it was regular and there was a guarantee.” The Maple Leaf also offers musicians the opportunity to earn more money if they can draw a strong crowd. If a specified percentage of the gate—typically 80%—is larger than the guarantee, then the band gets to keep that portion of the gate. “Beating the guarantee” is how the Maple Leaf incentivizes strong crowd turnout without chaining the musicians’ income to it.

About a year and a half into the grand adventure, Tom Bethel was about to move to Washington, D.C. and decided he wanted to sell his share of the bar. When Judy Cooper heard this, she decided to sell hers too. “It wasn’t nearly as much fun as it looked like from the other side (of the bar),” she remembers. The two were offered $10,000 each for their shares. When asked if she had ever made that kind of

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return on any investment since, Cooper just laughs. "Hell no. Wish I had. Wish I could’ve."\textsuperscript{182}

Also around that time, chief instigator Bill Odom took a position with the University of Southern Mississippi and moved to Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Hattiesburg is only two hours drive from New Orleans, so Odom returned frequently and remained very much a presence at 8316 Oak Street. He turned day-to-day operations over to John Parsons. The handover was unceremonial. “[He] took everything on his desk and dumped it on me,” laughs Parsons.\textsuperscript{183} John Parsons would be the primary manager of the Maple Leaf for most of the next two decades.

Odom, of course, was not the only long-distance owner. Jim Stratton went back to New York shortly after the grand opening, but would return regularly during his tenure as an owner.

I have to say that I had no problem continuing my alliance with the Maple Leaf. ...I guess it was at least two months to a month (every year) that I was there in New Orleans. Back in New York, I got regular telephone conversations about, "There's a hurricane coming this way. It's probably going to miss us. Don't worry about it." Stuff like that... I went back and forth as much as I could... I had already done a lot of hitchhiking, so I did hitchhiking down there a couple of times, or I'd take an airplane if I had enough money... It's like you have a life here and a life there. Some people have wives in one town and a wife in another town. I just had a life in this town (NYC) and a life in that town (NOLA).

- Jim Stratton\textsuperscript{184}

One time they both returned was in February of 1977, when they hatched a plan to give their bar an edge over others in attracting customers. When Odom and Stratton both lived in New York City, they had to search long and hard to find a laundromat close enough to a bar so that they could enjoy themselves while their

\textsuperscript{182} Judy Cooper, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, May 2017.
\textsuperscript{183} John Parsons, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
\textsuperscript{184} Jim Stratton, telephone interview with author, April 2017.
clothes got clean. The two finally found one half a block down the street from the Limelight Bar on Seventh Avenue. Over drinks waiting for their clothes, Odom and Stratton would fantasize about a place where they people could wash clothes and get a good drink without having to run from place to place. Years later on the patio of the Maple Leaf, over drinks once more, the two men revisited their old fantasy. Odom would relay the story of that night the following year to a States-Item reporter.

It was about 1 in the morning and everyone but Stratton, myself, and Alice Davenport, who runs “Alice’s Restaurant” on the patio behind the bar, had cleared out. Stratton and I began regaling Alice with tales of the origin of the bar. I can’t remember all the details, but it was a hilarious night, just the three of us sitting there freezing, drinking cold beers. Invariably, we came to the idea of the laundry. By the time we walked out of the bar at 7 a.m. we’d dared each other to the point where neither of us could back out.

- Bill Odom

The next two sentences of the article offer a handy illustration of the general business strategy undergirding the Maple Leaf for most of its first two decades.

“After taking care of some business, Odom got in a cab to the bank and floated the loan to install the laundry. He was still drunk.” According to pianist Jon Cleary, this spirit carried over to the erstwhile launderers.

One of the things that used to tickle me was doing laundry at the Maple Leaf, because you’d go in the afternoon, put all your smelly socks and stuff in the washing machine and go sit at the bar. Get talking to someone, have a few drinks, and then one thing lead to another, and then stagger home and wake up the next morning wandering where all your underpants and socks were. “Oh, fuck. I left them in the fucking washing machine.” You’d go back to get them and somebody else would have got impatient and just taken them out and put them somewhere and someone else would have moved them, and eventually they’re just strewn all over the place, so you’d be picking up your articles of clothing. At which point they’re all dirty. You have to put them in again. Sometimes it would take a week to complete laundry.

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185 Kent, “Sippin’ Suds and Cleanin’ Duds.”
186 Kent, “Sippin’ Suds and Cleanin’ Duds.”
Even then they’d be like lots of socks missing and things like that. That’s always kind of funny, when doing the laundry is an excuse for a weeklong bender.

*Jon Cleary*\(^{187}\)

Ultimately, the laundromat was a failed experiment. After about four years, the machines were removed and the book was closed on the Maple Leaf’s brief flirtation with cleanliness. While a few of the patrons, such as Cleary and the poet Nancy Harris, have fond memories of being able to tip a glass while cleaning their skivvies, others were less impressed. The staff especially did not care for them.

The problem with it was there [were] only four washers and two dryers. Sometimes people would stand in line… Somebody wrote you could go see the Society Jazz Band and… they’ll take you through the spin cycle… Then Kurt Kasson will take you to the rinse cycle. It was difficult because they were in a room by themselves and they wasn’t supervised or in view of the bartender so people would vandalize them. It was a big problem with… I would find things in the washers, [stuff like] broken glass and… things you don’t want to talk about too much.

*John Parsons*\(^{188}\)

\(^{187}\) Jon Cleary, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 2017.

\(^{188}\) John Parsons, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
Ch. 4- THE HONEYDRIPPER & THE PIANO PRINCE

Pianos have always been integral to the music of New Orleans and Louisiana. The importance of the piano in the development of the style and sound of the music of New Orleans is comparable to that of the guitar in the music of the Mississippi Delta. In their book *Up From The Cradle Of Jazz: New Orleans Music Since World War II*, New Orleans music scholars Jason Berry, Jonathan Foose, and Tad Jones trace the phenomenon back to the turn of the nineteenth century, when theater-building was in vogue in New Orleans. “[The] piano served many functions,” they explain. “It was a necessity for operas and symphonies. Ladies of affluent families viewed it as a status symbol; a home should have a parlor, the parlor its piano. Theater owners wanted pianos, and in time, so did tavern owners.”¹⁸⁹ Pianos were also a regular feature in the barrelhouses that served the workers in the lumber and turpentine camps in the rural areas around New Orleans. In the city they were used by madams and pimps to lure customers of the street and entertain them while they were inside. In the nineteen-thirties, after most all the jazz musicians who were talented

enough to leave the city had done so, the music of New Orleans was reborn as R&B through barrelhouse piano players like Isidore “Tuts” Washington.¹⁹⁰

So it is not a surprise that piano players played a significant role in the beginnings of the Maple Leaf Bar. “Very important at first were Roosevelt Sykes and James Booker,” explains John Parsons.¹⁹¹ Of the two, it was Booker that would leave the most indelible mark on 8316 Oak Street. But Roosevelt Sykes, who preceded Booker on the Maple Leaf stage by a year, left behind a legacy outside the confines 8316 Oak Street that far overshadowed that of James Booker. A titan in the history of blues piano, Sykes- nicknamed “The Honeydripper”- was not a native of New Orleans. He was born in rural Arkansas in 1908 and learned to play when he was just a child on an old organ his grandfather owned. He made his first recording in 1929, and became a national star during the 1930’s. He settled in New Orleans in 1952, but continued to tour the country.¹⁹² Sykes was one of the first American blues artists to tour Europe, making his first trip across the pond in 1961. He retired from heavy touring in the late 1960’s, but continued to play around New Orleans and south Louisiana. He performed regularly at the Court of Two Sisters on Bourbon Street in the late sixties and early seventies.¹⁹³

According to John Parsons, it was Bill Odom who was responsible for first booking Roosevelt Sykes. Odom had seen Sykes at the Jazz and Heritage Festival,

¹⁹⁰ Hannusch, I Hear You Knockin’.
¹⁹³ Court of Two Sisters, Advertisement, Times-Picayune, July 27, 1968, Sec. 2.
where he performed every year from its inception until his death.\textsuperscript{194} The first newspaper listing of a Sykes performance at the Maple Leaf was for Thursday, September 29, 1977.\textsuperscript{195} The next was for Friday, December 2 of the same year.\textsuperscript{196} Writer Jeff Hannusch described a typical Sykes show at the Maple Leaf in a 1983 edition of \textit{Wavelength} magazine.

\begin{quote}
Seeing Sykes at the Maple Leaf was always a memorable experience. He usually arrived early and propped himself up at the end of the bar with a beefy cigar hanging from the left side of his mouth, joking and laughing with anyone who would care to listen... Then he’d down his drink and amble (Sykes was confined to a wheelchair the last couple of years) and park his considerable girth behind the oft-times out-of-tune upright piano. He’d proceed to roll back the years treating the audience to a lesson in bluesology, playing numbers from his vast repertoire that spanned some 60 years. More often than not, he’d joke and quip between numbers. “Have some fun, get drunk and be somebody else for a change.” Or, “Back in a flash with some more trash.” Often he’d end the set with a hilarious version of “Gulf Coast Boogie,” where he’d take a musical trip down Chef Menteur Highway: “Gentilly woods, Schwegmann Brothers, TG&Y, K&B, Kentucky Fried Chicken- finger lickin’ good!”

- Jeff Hannusch\textsuperscript{197}
\end{quote}

The final Roosevelt Sykes performance at the Maple Leaf listed in the newspaper was on May 15, 1982.\textsuperscript{198} He died at Charity Hospital in New Orleans on Monday, July 11, 1983, two months after his final performance at the Jazz and Heritage Festival.\textsuperscript{199}

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\textsuperscript{195} “The Calendar,” \textit{States-Item}, Sept. 29, 1977, Sec. B.
\textsuperscript{196} “Calendar,” \textit{Times-Picayune}, Nov. 26, 1977, Lagniappe.
\textsuperscript{198} “The Calendar,” \textit{Times-Picayune}, May 15, 1982, Sec. 3.
\textsuperscript{199} Most contemporary sources list the date of Sykes’s death as July 17, 1983, but his obituary appeared in the \textit{Times-Picayune} on Thursday, July 14, 1983, identifying the date of his passing as the previous Monday. A \textit{New York Times} obituary ran the following day with the same information. John Pope, “Blues Pianist-Singer Roosevelt Sykes Dies,” \textit{Times-Picayune}, July 14, 1983, Sec. 1.
\end{flushleft}
James Booker, “The Piano Prince of New Orleans,” only performed at the Maple Leaf Bar regularly for five years. His first listed performance was on January 16, 1979.\textsuperscript{200} His final show was on Halloween night 1983. By Maple Leaf standards, five years isn’t very long. Rockin’ Dopsie held down his spot for ten years. Johnny Vidacovich is currently working on the thirteenth year of leading his Trio on Thursdays. Walter “Wolfman” Washington did ten years with his own band The Roadmasters and is currently at ten years and counting with the Joe Krown Trio. Rebirth Brass Band is closing in on thirty.

Booker’s shows at the Maple Leaf were not always well attended. Poet Ralph Adamo spent a lot of time hanging out at the Maple Leaf around then with Everette Maddox.

...Booker was their regular [Tuesday] night... I think it was mostly Parsons giving him some money. It’s amazing Booker needed charity to play, especially considering how popular he’s become since he’s dead. He would play every [Tuesday] night; sometimes there would be nobody there but me and Everette. This is ’79, 80, ’81. We would listen, but we were also talking, so Booker’s kind of playing for himself up there.

- Ralph Adamo\textsuperscript{201}

At Booker’s final performance at the Maple Leaf- the final performance of his life- there were only five people in attendance. Yet for as short a time as he was there, and for as little noticed or appreciated while he was, no musician is more closely identified with the Maple Leaf Bar than James Booker. Much as Professor Longhair is the patron saint of Tiptina’s- there is a massive mural of his face above the stage- James Booker is the mascot and muse of the Maple Leaf Bar. A life-sized woodcut of

\textsuperscript{201} Ralph Adamo, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 2016.
Booker—wearing only his underwear and a policeman’s cap—is a permanent fixture on the Maple Leaf’s small stage.202

James Carroll Booker III was born at Charity Hospital in New Orleans on December 17, 1939. A child prodigy on the piano, Booker was giving classical recitals by age 6. He also received instruction as a child in R&B piano from family friend Isidore “Tuts” Washington.203 Booker recorded his first single at age fourteen, and by his late teens was being employed by Fats Domino’s producer to play Fats’s piano tracks in the studio while the R&B star was on the road (Domino would record the vocal tracks when he came in off tour). Booker was the first person to play the organ on Bourbon Street in the fifties, and instructed both Allen Toussaint and Dr. John on the instrument.204

In a city famous for its piano players, Booker stands out as perhaps the best of them all. Legendary composer and producer Allen Toussaint once said of him, “There is a word that is thrown around so loosely for certain people who have done well in life, if they do very well in life, they call them geniuses, but let me say that if the word is applicable to anyone, the person who comes to mind is James Booker.

204 Hannusch, “James Booker: Piano Prince of New Orleans.”
Total genius.” Pianist Joshua Paxton, who has studied and transcribed Booker’s recordings, has described his playing as, “...Ray Charles on the level of Chopin. It’s got all the soul, all the groove, all the technique in the universe packed into one unbelievable player. It’s like playing Listz and Professor Longhair at the same time... He invented an entirely new way of playing the blues and roots-based music on the piano, and it was mind-blowingly brilliant and beautiful.” Harry Connick, Jr., who took lessons from Booker as a child, is declarative about his mentor: “If all the American piano players lined up in a row, each knowing the others’ abilities and talents, all would take a step back to recognize the greatest of all.”

Booker spent the sixties and seventies touring and recording with performers as varied as B.B. King, Little Richard, Aretha Franklin, Jerry Garcia, The Doobie Brothers, and Ringo Starr. He recorded and released a few of his own songs—his instrumental “Gonzo” reached #10 on the national R&B charts in 1961 and would inspire the writer Hunter S. Thompson to appropriate its title as the moniker for his new kind of journalism - but for the most part, real success eluded Booker. “His genius,” writes Sean O’Hagan, “often took a second place to his waywardness. Various musicians attest to Booker’s madness and self-sabotage, as well as the drug busts and no-shows that harmed his career.”

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206 Kunian, “Why Does James Booker Matter?”.
207 Kunian, “Why Does James Booker Matter?”.
Booker was paranoid, temperamental, and given more and more to delusion as the years went by. “One person once asked me if James Booker was crazy,” John Parsons once told an interviewer. “I thought about the question for a while and I couldn’t think of any way he wasn’t crazy. He was manic depressive, schizophrenic, self-destructive to the point of suicidal, a severe alcoholic.”

Booker was an open homosexual black man living in the deep South at a time when being either gay or black could be dangerous. He was also addicted to heroin, which he claimed stemmed from being given large doses of morphine at the age of nine after being run over by an ambulance. Booker had problems.

His performances at the Maple Leaf and elsewhere around New Orleans could be, to put it mildly, uneven. "James Booker is often the most interesting pianist in the city," wrote Bunny Matthews in a 1981 story for the Times-Picayune, "but just as often he can seem comatose, perhaps the result of his longtime battle with drugs. Sometimes he doesn’t even arrive for his gigs; sometimes his brilliance is overwhelming." Booker was known to lose interest, stop playing in the middle of a song, and wander off the stage. Or he might get dope-sick and vomit on the keyboard in front of him. Musician David Torkanowsky tells a story about seeing him one night at Tipitina’s. Booker walked onto the stage wearing nothing but a diaper held fastened by a large gold pin. “From behind the nappy, he pulls out a .357 Magnum,” Torkanowsky continues, “puts it to his own head and announces to the

https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/nov/20/james-booker-tragic-piano-genius.

210 Sean O’Hagan, “Cocaine Boogie.”
audience, 'If somebody doesn't give me some cocaine right now, I'm going to fucking pull the trigger.'"\(^{212}\)

But when Booker was on, he was on. David Rubien wrote about one of those nights for the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

I had the privilege of seeing Booker perform three times during the 1982 (Jazz and Heritage) Festival, a year before he died. One of the shows, at a divey bar with a laundry in the back called the Maple Leaf, proved to be one of the most incredible musical experiences of my life. Booker was playing a blues, I can't recall which one, maybe “Black Night.” With a left hand like a piston with a heart and brain in each finger, Booker more or less hypnotized me. His right hand, fanning runs that didn't seem humanly possible, engendered a feeling I'd never experienced. I can't really explain it, but it was as if he'd cracked open a portal in my soul and poured all of his world of pain and wisdom directly in. I looked around the room, and people were weeping.

- David Rubien\(^{213}\)

Like much of what happens at the Maple Leaf, details of just how Booker initially made his way to 8316 Oak Street are hard to pin down. In 1989 John Parsons told writer Jeff Hannusch, “He just came in one night and played a set as an audition. After that I hired him for a few spot gigs and then he started playing here every week.”\(^{214}\) However, the first listing for a James Booker show at the Maple Leaf in the *Times-Picayune* identifies him as already part of the weekly schedule: “James Booker on Tuesdays.”\(^{215}\) In his interview with the author, Parsons stated that he himself had booked him for the gig that first night and was “setting up the piano- by

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\(^{212}\) Sean O'Hagan, “Cocaine Boogie.”
\(^{214}\) Jeff Hannusch, “Maple leaf Chalks Up 15 Years of Hometown Music.”
that time I was the sound man too- and I was wiring up the mics...” for the show that night the first time Booker walked in the door.²¹⁶

At the Maple Leaf, Booker performed either solo or with a remarkable trio that consisted of young phenoms Johnny Vidacovich on drums and James Singleton on bass, along with legendary session musician Alvin “Red” Tyler on saxophone. According to bartender Tim Allspach, Booker shows “could be as dead as can be, or the joint would be jumping. Especially when he was playing with the trio... And when that was cooking and there was a whole lot of people, I mean the whole band area was packed and the bar was packed. Or, it could be a morgue.”²¹⁷ Drummer Johnny Vidacovich remembers these gigs with Booker fondly.

[The gigs then were] much more organic. One microphone. No big P.A., none of that crap... The stage was maybe four or five inches tall. It was just basic elevation... The piano was terrible; Booker played it anyways and made it sound great. I like the fact that there was [not a] whole lot of microphones. People had to be quiet if they wanted to really hear the music.

- Johnny Vidacovich²¹⁸

Roosevelt Sykes liked Booker, but saw that the younger pianist needed some guidance. “Roosevelt was actually the first person that suggested I manage Booker,” says Parsons. “Roosevelt said, to me, “That boy ain’t foolin’ around; he playin’ chords, but he needs management.”²¹⁹ Parsons genuinely liked Booker, and tried to help him by serving as his unofficial manager. “[That] was pretty interesting,” he said later. “I’d get calls every week from all over the country offering him a couple thousand dollars to just play one set, but Booker refused to leave New Orleans.”²²⁰

²¹⁶ John Parsons, interview with the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
²²⁰ Jeff Hannusch, “Maple leaf Chalks Up 15 Years of Hometown Music.”
Parsons was also enthralled by the music Booker created, and recorded many of his sets at the Maple Leaf. After Booker’s death, Parsons’s tapes became the basis for two posthumous releases by Rounder Records. *Spiders On The Keys: Live At The Maple Leaf Bar*, named after Booker’s description of his fingers, was a solo record. *Resurrection of The Bayou Maharaja: Live At The Maple Leaf Bar* was with his trio of Singleton, Tyler, and Vidacovich. In his Allmusic.com review of *Resurrection of The Bayou Maharaja*, Bob Gottlieb writes, “He is at his best here (recorded at the Maple Leaf between 1972-1982), focused and intense in his playing, wildly passionate on both keyboards and vocals. Some songs are repeated on the companion disc (*Spider On The Keys*), but each treatment makes the songs new again, so that even his standards are always fresh and vital. Sheer genius at the keyboards and unrestrained, heartfelt vocals...”

Booker performed at the Maple Leaf most every Tuesday night for four years, until one night he didn’t show up. Flush with cash after a successful recording session that would eventually yield the album *Classified*, Booker had disappeared, seemingly into thin air. After searching for him for two or three weeks, Parsons finally tracked him in the New Orleans House of Detention, where he was being held under an assumed name on a charge of disturbing the peace. Parsons moved Booker’s weekly performance to Monday, where it would remain for the last year of his life.

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James Booker died on November 8, 1983, sitting in a wheelchair waiting to be admitted into Charity Hospital, where he had been born. Poet Ralph Adamo remembers sitting at the Maple Leaf with John Parsons and Everette Maddox when they got the news. Maddox sighed and said, “Fled is that music,” a line from Keats’s “Ode To A Nightingale.”223 In a touch of irony (or grim serendipity), James Booker died on a Tuesday, his original night to perform on the Maple Leaf stage. Today, Tuesday nights at the Maple Leaf are known to most of New Orleans as “Rebirth Tuesdays.” But to long-time regulars inside the confines of 8316 Oak Street, Tuesdays will always be “Booker night.”

**Cajun Night**

At the Maple Leaf, there are collisions on the dance floor. Knees knock, couples thud into each other from behind. Dancers spin out from their partners and get carried off by the crowd. Dixie longnecks litter the bar like vanquished rolling pins.

- *Times-Picayune, Feb. 16, 1986*224

Carl Brown liked to dabble in politics. In 1979 he decided to hold a fundraiser at the Maple Leaf for a Louisiana gubernatorial candidate, Edgar G. “Sonny” Mouton, Jr. Mouton was then President Pro-Tempore of the Louisiana State Senate and one of seven Democrats competing in the state’s open primary. An attorney from Lafayette, Mouton was running as the “Cajun” candidate. “So Brown told me, ‘Find a Cajun band. We want a Cajun band that night (for the fundraiser),’” explains John Parsons. “I went down to Bourbon Street and I was walking around and I heard this band playing in a patio bar... I went back there and I found ‘em. Their name was actually

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223 Ralph Adamo, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 2017.
Laissez-Faire. So I hired 'em and they came to the party and they played.” 225 Mouton spoke that night at the Maple Leaf, but it apparently wasn’t enough. He came in sixth out of nine in the primary. But the Maple Leaf found Laissez-Faire, and they both came out winners.

Laissez-Faire was actually not the first Cajun band to perform at the Maple Leaf. The Louisiana Aces played some shows there in the late seventies. Led by the “Cajun Hank Williams” D.L. Menard, the Louisiana Aces were one of the first traditional Cajun bands to find widespread popularity in the folk revival. When they weren’t on State Department tours in the seventies and eighties, they still gigged around the Bayou State. The Times-Picayune shows them playing at the Maple Leaf on Sunday night, April 9, 1978. 226

They were [used] to sitting down and playing for eight hours… That’s what they did up in bayou country. But here, all they had to do was play for three or four hours with breaks. They never took breaks. They just sat there and drank. They were great, and they brought in a lot of people.

At the point, the only Cajun music you could hear anywhere in the city was (on) Airline Highway. There were a couple of beer bars out there that hired some local Cajun people from New Orleans who weren’t really particularly Cajun. They were just musicians. They were local, hometown musicians, not back bayou guys. - Jim Stratton 227

Other Cajun bands performed at the Maple Leaf from time to time, but none had held down a weekly spot, although a band called Street Corner Jive performed on Thursday nights throughout 1979 and was described by the Times-Picayune as a “swing-blues-country-Cajun group.” 228 They were probably in the neighborhood.

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225 John Parsons, interview with the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
226 “Calendar,” States-Item, April 8, 1978, Lagniappe.
227 Jim Stratton, telephone interview with author, April 2017.
The first newspaper listing for a weekly Laissez-Faire show is for Thursday night, December 20, 1979. Thursday nights would be Cajun night at the Maple Leaf for the next dozen years. However, Laissez-Faire only led the party for its first six months. Tired of running his own band, Laissez-Faire bandleader Richard Seymour decided to step aside and turn the weekly gig over to up-and-coming button accordion player Bruce Daigrepont and his band Bourre. Today Daigrepont is known as the “dean of traditional Cajun music in New Orleans,” but in 1980 he was still learning his instrument. “I doubt I had been playing accordion for more than a year,” he later told Jerry Brock. Daigrepont may have been new to his instrument, but he wasn’t new to the Maple Leaf stage. While he was still in high school, he had played banjo with a bluegrass group called the Green Valley Cutups that performed at the club on Sundays. “We played there about a year in 1974 and ’75, and the place was pretty much full every week,” he told Brock. “I was 15 when I started playing there. My parents would come and I wasn’t allowed to walk around the club.”

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232 Brock, “As The Leaf Turns.”
233 Brock, “As The Leaf Turns;” Super Bowl IX was held at Tulane Stadium in New Orleans on Jan. 12, 1975. The *States-Item* ran a special section for visitors to town the Saturday before the game which contained this listing: “Or, if you’re stuck Uptown after the game, a good-humored and entertaining way to enjoy that area is by dropping in on the Maple Leaf, 8316 Oak Street, a mostly-for-students bar where the Green Valley Cutups will be playing blue grass music from 9-1:30.”
Bourre’s first official Cajun night performance was Thursday, July 10, 1980. “We were still learning our instruments but we kept it going and the crowd seemed to love us,” Daigrepont remembered. “When I think back to those Thursday nights, I always felt like I was going to a party.” Cajun night quickly turned Thursdays into a big night at the Maple Leaf. Not only was it wildly popular, it was also financially successful, and dependably so. This was a new and welcome experience for the Maple Leaf’s novice business owners. Parsons gives much of the credit to the dancers. “Dancers have made Cajun and Zydeco music popular,” he explained to a reporter. “People had so much fun dancing to the music that the crowds really grew.”

John Parsons has never been parsimonious with his praise for the Cajun dancers. “The dancers... you gotta give them the right credit,” he says. “[The] dancers were just as much a part of the show as the band.” “[There] was a nucleus of about a dozen girls who would teach the guys hanging out in the bar how to dance,” Parsons explained to Jerry Brock. Peg Usner was one of those girls and an early regular at Cajun night. Today she is an artist who paints plein air landscape oil paintings, but at the time she taught interior design at Delgado Community College and was starting her life over after a divorce.

...[After] I got divorced... I started hanging out with people that were doing things that I like, and I started running... [There] was a Cajun band after one of the races.

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235 Brock, “As The Leaf Turns.”
237 Brock, “As The Leaf Turns.”
239 Brock, “As The Leaf Turns.”
Everybody was dancing. I go, "Well, where can we do this?" And they said, "Well, there's a band at the Maple Leaf." So we all went on a little field trip.

However, at the Maple Leaf, all of the tables and chairs were right up to the stage, so I'm like, "Hmm... What do you do?" So we moved a few tables, a couple of us, then we moved a few more, and within a couple of months, the whole room was cleared... no tables anymore.

- Peg Usner

The biggest problem Usner and the other female dancers had was finding partners who knew what they were doing. "You would stay away from the [guys] who just wanted to polish their belt buckles on your dress," she laughs. "You [wanted to] dance with the ones who had a little skill..." They sometimes had difficulty balancing between teaching new partners how to Cajun dance and just having fun themselves. Often the girls just danced with each other. A chance encounter one night would make Usner pro-active in creating a solution for their dilemma.

...It's a Thursday night and summer, and it's hot. Some guy comes up to me and he says, "Can you teach me how to dance?" And I said, "I just had three two-steps in a row. I'm dripping (with sweat), and you're going to have to wait. I'm going to have a beer." And he said, "Oh no, no. I mean- will you come to my house? I got six people who want to take a class." ...There were no classes. And I was like, "A class? You crazy?" But I was a teacher, so of course there was a class in everything, right?

- Peg Usner

Usner looked around the city and couldn't find anywhere that taught Cajun dancing. Ever the teacher, she went to the library and found some books on folk dancing. She made notes, wrote out a curriculum, and took it all with her to her new student's house. That first class was a success, and word began to spread. Next thing she knew, people were calling her up to inquire about Cajun dance classes. To Usner's knowledge, she was the first person to teach Cajun dancing professionally in the city.

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240 Peg Usner, interview with author, Mandeville, Louisiana, June 2017.
241 Peg Usner, interview with author, Mandeville, Louisiana, June 2017.
242 Peg Usner, interview with author, Mandeville, Louisiana, June 2017.
New Orleans. She taught classes in various locations—wherever she could rent a
space big enough, really—from the Benevolent Knights of America Hall to Touro
Synagogue. But graduation was always at the Maple Leaf. The class would have a
potluck out on the patio, and when the band took a break, Peg would get onstage
and hand out diplomas.

I’d call them up... and hand them their diploma. They’d have to dance up, you know.
But it was really perfect at the Maple Leaf, because it was where we were going
anyway. They (the new graduates) were going to be part of the scene. From then on,
it’s like they got “the bug,” and they were there, Thursday nights, dancing.

-Peg Usner

Upon reflection, Usner remembers “the scene” as being just as important to
her as the dancing. Cajun nights were where she made new friends, and developed a
new sense of herself as a single mother living in the city.

Anyway, it just got to be my place, my thing. I really felt like I was a part of it. It was
like, “Just go to the Leaf on Thursday night.” [It’s] something I wouldn’t have done. I
mean, after high school, I go away to college. I come back, I’m in a marriage that’s
very constraining and constricting, and I feel very not my own person...[and then]
becoming the person [who says], “Meet me at the Leaf?” Meaning: I take myself to an
uptown bar, and all my friends are there. Wow. I mean, you don’t think about it. You
just do it, and then you go, “Wow, this is it. This is what I did.” And it was the people
I would see... I knew if I went there, my friends were there.

-Peg Usner

At the Maple Leaf, Cajun music was guaranteed for Cajun night, but not
confined to it. Some of the most important and influential Cajun performers in the
world appeared frequently on the Oak Street stage during the nineteen-eighties.
Today, BeauSoleil is “without question the best-known proponent of Cajun music in
this solar system,” according to journalist Rick Koster. Their forty-plus years have
seen the band travel the world several times over, spreading the French Acadian

243 Peg Usner, interview with author, Mandeville, Louisiana, June 2017.
244 Peg Usner, interview with author, Mandeville, Louisiana, June 2017.
music of southern Louisiana to near universal acclaim and critical praise. Frontman Michael Doucette is a distinguished elder statesman in the world of folk and roots music and has been recognized for his efforts with a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. But when John Parsons caught them at their first Jazz and Heritage Festival performance in 1981, Beausoleil was just a band from Lafayette, Louisiana trying to put a modern spin on traditional music and still searching for an audience that wanted to hear it. They had performed at President Jimmy Carter’s inauguration five years before, but the band members were all still five years away from quitting their day jobs.²⁴⁶ “They were playing the Jazz Festival and there was like 10 or 12 people listening to ‘em.... I hired ‘em there on the spot.”²⁴⁷ BeauSoleil’s first performance at the Jazz and Heritage Festival was on May 1, 1981. A little more than two months later, on July 11, they would make their first appearance at the Maple Leaf.²⁴⁸ Beausoleil would perform at the Maple Leaf every month or two for the rest of the decade.

It’s not hyperbole to say that fiddler Dewey Balfa was instrumental in the revival and popularization of Cajun music beginning with his appearance (filling in on guitar) at the Newport Folk Festival in 1964. But more important to Balfa than bringing his native music to the world was preserving and fostering it in its own home. To this end, Balfa was a driving force behind a Cajun music festival in Lafayette, Louisiana that today is known as Festivals Acadiens. He used his 1982 NEA National Heritage Fellowship to put on Cajun music workshops in schools.

around Southern Louisiana. Balfa performed several times at the Maple Leaf in the mid-eighties with his band Ses Amis Acadiens. His first listed performance was on May 26, 1984\textsuperscript{249} and his final known performance was on New Year’s Eve 1988.\textsuperscript{250}

There is a bit of irony in the fact that the bayou music of the Acadian French so thoroughly made the participatory spirit of New Orleans music come alive inside the Maple Leaf. But the whirling masses furiously two-stepping their way around the small room on Thursday nights were just as indispensable to the music that was created in there as anyone on the stage. Cajun night was also the first major step in developing the Maple Leaf’s identity as a showcase for Louisiana music. Booker’s legend would grow with time, but the Maple Leaf built its reputation on Cajun night.

\textsuperscript{249} “Calendar,” \textit{Times-Picayune}, May 26, 1984, Sec. 3.
The bar continued to draw patrons attracted to things other than music. Parson's cadre of beer-drinking chess players made up some of these patrons, having basically relocated their hangout from the Seven Seas in the French Quarter to the Maple Leaf. The Maple Leaf was even briefly home to a franchise of the short-lived National Chess League in the late 70's. Comprised of 16 teams from around the country, teams would hold matches over the phone, six games at a time. Their team was the New Orleans Maple Leafs, and John Parsons was the team owner.

Poets and writers were also attracted to the Maple Leaf in the late 70's, particularly a group of friends formed around a poet and professor of English Everette Maddox. Along with a few others, Maddox would launch a weekly poetry reading series at the Maple Leaf in 1979. Maddox died in 1989, but friends and regular attendees carried on the tradition. Today, the Sunday readings are advertised as the oldest continually running poetry reading in the Southeast, and one of the oldest in the U.S. Maddox was chronically homeless and would often sleep at the bar. According to Parsons, he liked to sleep in the clothes dryers “because they were warm.” Everette Maddox died in 1989 from complications from stomach cancer. His ashes are buried in the back patio under a small granite maker. Underneath his name is his chosen inscription, “He Was A Mess”.

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When the Maple Leaf opened, the Carrollton neighborhood surrounding the bar was in a state of flux. Soon, it was on a downslide. Judy Cooper does not remember feeling unsafe when she would close up the bar alone in the wee hours of the morning during the mid-seventies. She never regarded the neighborhood as dangerous. But by the time Hank Staples arrived in the area in the mid-80's, the neighborhood surrounding the Maple Leaf was, in his words, “rundown, seedy, and dangerous.” Oak Street mostly consisted of businesses on the first few blocks coming from Carrollton Avenue. The 8300 block was where this began to change, with more residences than businesses. From the beginning of the 8400 block all the way to the River was almost entirely residential, and city directories from the time list numerous vacant addresses.

Business owners and residents were not content to let the neighborhood slide off into the abyss without a fight. An article in the November 27, 1982 edition of the *Times-Picayune* details an effort organized by business owners, including Jimmy Anselmo of Jimmy's Music Club, Jed Palmer of Tupelo's Bar, and John Parsons of the Maple Leaf to raise money for paint to cover the graffiti that was becoming an eyesore up and down the street. A hardware store sold the group paint at cost and the business people and neighbors spent a Saturday painting over the graffiti themselves. While they were out there, they also decided to clean Oak Street from

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254 Cite early 80's city directory
Carrollton Avenue to Cambronne. But determined locals armed with paintbrushes and trash bags could only do so much.

The police blotter in the Times-Picayune only records two burglaries of the Maple Leaf during this time. In early August of 1977, a burglar got in through a serving window in the patio and stole $970 from the cash register. In March of 1982, thieves broke in and got away with three cash boxes containing $3,000. While it is likely that the real number of burglaries was higher, according to John Parsons it was not a frequent occurrence. To date, no one has ever robbed the Maple Leaf with patrons inside. But the walking down the street could be dangerous.

In December of 1982, a 19-year-old man named Victor Wade mugged two different men on the 8200 block of Oak Street in the span of nine days. He stabbed and robbed both of them, attacking Tulane University maintenance worker Albert Maury on December 4 and Loyola University acting and drama professor Donald Brady on December 13. Both men were residents of the neighborhood. Brady was walking to the Maple Leaf when Wade jumped out from a recessed doorway and stabbed him 7 times. Brady seemed remarkably unshaken about the incident when speaking with a Times-Picayune reporter the following month. Asked if he knew the first victim, Albert Maury, Brady relayed an anecdote about running into him shortly after their attacks.

“I saw Al the other day at the Maple Leaf Bar. Yes, the Maple Leaf: I’m not going to change my habits. We toasted each other and decided to start the Oak Street Victims

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Association. Al will be president since he was first. I’ll be vice-president.” There’s a pause, then: “I may have to stab him to get to the top.”

-Times-Picayune, January 9, 1983

The apparent danger did not deter people from venturing onto Oak Street. Maple Leaf old-timers talk about a “wave of English people” that appeared on Oak Street in the early 1980’s. Grammy-winning piano player Jon Cleary was among the earliest of these English visitors. His mother’s brother had introduced him to the music of New Orleans. An artist, musician, and classic cool uncle, this man traveled frequently all over the world, gone sometimes for years at a stretch. On one such excursion, Cleary’s cool uncle had an extended stay in New Orleans. He returned to England with two suitcases full of 45s of Crescent City R&B. When he played them for his nephew, young Cleary couldn’t get enough. He proceeded to search through record shops and second-hand stores, but soon recognized he wasn’t going to find much of this music anywhere around England. Cleary realized that the only way to get more of the records he wanted would be to go to New Orleans. He decided to do so right after he graduated from high school. For a while, that was his only plan.

My uncle’s band was playing at a pub in north London called the Pegasus, in Stoke Newington, about a week or two weeks before I was due to fly out. His girlfriend at the time, I told her that I was going to New Orleans. She said, “Where are you going to stay at?” I didn’t have any idea, I was just going. Her sister had been traveling through the States and had arrived in New Orleans, and just stayed. She’d got a job tending bar at the Maple Leaf. This Angie, this girl, she reached in her bag and pulled out a little card, the Maple Leaf Bar, and said, “Here, you better take this. Call the number on the card when you get there, and ask for my sister Fiona.” That’s what I did, I called from the airport, when I arrived in New Orleans airport. She just told me, ”Get in a cab and ask for the Maple Leaf Bar, see you when you get here.”

When you’re that young, you’re fairly impulsive and fairly impetuous, and you don’t really consider all the potential things that could go wrong. Had I been a bit older, I probably would have had a lot more to be concerned about, but I think I was so

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258 James Hodge, “Professor Survives Knifing With Humor, Compassion Intact,” Times-Picayune, Jan. 1, 1983, Sec. 1.
259 Jon Cleary, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 2017.
young and so naïve that I just assumed everything would be all right and things would fall into place, and they did.

- Jon Cleary

Fiona and her boyfriend Johnny Rope had been in Carrollton a few months already. “They were the first English people, I think, that anybody in that neighborhood had ever seen,” muses Cleary. After Cleary arrived, his friends began to trickle in one by one. It’s common in England to take a “gap year” between school and university to work or travel. This was Cleary’s excuse, and that of his friends who followed suit. A couple of weeks later, his best mate Dan arrived, followed by both their girlfriends and a couple of other guys. The six of them rented one half of a double shotgun house in the neighborhood. “Yeah, that’s why, I think, the perception on the part of the locals- all of a sudden there were a lot of teenagers, English people running around everywhere.” He quickly adds, “They all really dug it, everyone was anglophiles.”

One person who took a shine to Cleary and Dan was Maple Leaf owner Carl Brown. Carl was amused by the teenaged Englishmen running around unsupervised halfway around the world from home, and kind of took them under his wing. He was, in his own way, fatherly to them. He would take them out to eat with him from time to time and give them odd jobs when they needed money, which was often. What they gave to Carl was a captive audience for his rantings, ravings, and racist tirades.

He would just go on [and on] ... and everyone in the bar was sick to death of it. He had these two kids... we didn't have a clue what he was talking about. He gave us a

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262 Jon Cleary, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 2017.
job, and would take us out to dinner… He wanted some company if he felt like a
sandwich, so we’d go have a sandwich with him. He was very kind to us. I wouldn’t
be here if it hadn’t been for Carl Brown.

- Jon Cleary

This is how Jon Cleary came to be part of a crew that painted the Maple Leaf
Bar. It wasn’t the first job Carl had given the Englishmen. First he had them dig up
some banana trees in the yard behind the patio. At the time, the back of the Maple
Leaf property was basically just an unkempt yard, mostly dirt and weeds, and a few
banana trees. “The roots of those things go way down. It’s a fucking nightmare,”
remembers Cleary. After having them do odd jobs at some other properties he
owned, Brown began looking around for things for them to do. Tim Allspach was
managing the Maple Leaf at the time. He regularly told Carl about repairs and
improvements that needed to be made around the bar, and Brown usually refused
to pay for anything.

...Absolutely the building needed to be painted, but Carl... suddenly he decides, these
English guys show up, Carl’s background his ancestry is England. So now he’s got all
these English lads and he can sit there and he loved to talk and talk and have an
audience there listening to him. He loved...that was his favorite thing on the planet.
So now he’s got all these English lads there and they’re going to sit and listen to him
cause he’s feeding them beer free. So out of this comes he deciding OK, the building
needs to be fixed, he’s gonna hire them to paint [the River side] of the building.

- Tim Allspach

That was the deal when we got offered a job, was we got free drink while we
worked. We could work whatever hours we wanted. We got five bucks an hour,
which was the minimum wage, and we got to see all the bands for nothing, and half
price drink at any other time, although that faded straightaway, we just got basically
free drink all the time at the bar.

We usually wouldn’t start work till two in the afternoon The bar didn’t open till
three, and we didn’t have keys, but we could climb over the gate, let ourselves in the
back. There was a little storeroom inside, which I guess is Hank’s office now, but
used to be where all the paint and the ladders and everything were. We’d be the first

263 Jon Cleary, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 2017.
ones in there, and we’d help ourselves to make a couple of drinks, bag of crisps. I’d sit there and play the piano for an hour. Usually I would try and finish playing the piano before the manager showed up, but often I’d just get carried away, and I’d be sitting there playing the piano and drinking a beer, and the manager (Tim) would show up, walk in, and go, "What the fuck you doing? You’re supposed to be out there painting." He would get really pissed off.

- Jon Cleary 267

...How is [Carl] going to pay for them? It’s summer time. The bar is dead slow. Its liquor stock is way down... Unless he’s got money to write a check to the distributor, he has to go to city wholesale and buy a bottle at a time in cash at a higher price cause he can’t get anybody to deliver cause he can’t afford to write the check for what he really needs. So we’re down to the point then, and I am the check manager type thing, and also this is [during] summer time and I’m working extra shifts at night bartending. Well, as a night bartender, I’m trying to earn money. That’s the whole reason for the job. And somebody comes in and orders something, and I turn around, and there isn’t a bottle of bourbon over there. Well where does the money come from to buy these bottles of booze that we needed at night? It came out of the proceeds of the day shift. Where were these English and French guys getting paid? Getting paid from the days shift proceeds.

- Tim Allspach 268

They hated us, because at the end of every day we’d pack up, covered in paint, pack up the ladders and go to the bar with a piece of paper with the number of hours we’d done. Then they would pay us out of the till, so basically we emptied the till every night. The manager was really sore. It took us six months to paint the place. We were absolutely useless, but Carl Brown didn’t really care. He thought it was hilarious.

- Jon Cleary 269

269 Jon Cleary, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 2017.
Ch. 6- MUSICAL IDENTITY

But then the music sort of crept in more and more because it was too good for business.

- Hank Staples270

The bar, which had only been music for that [Saturday] or sometimes Friday/Saturday, while I was there, suddenly became a magnet for musicians. I’d get a call, “Well, we’re adding Thursday.” “Oh, we’re adding Wednesday.”

- Jim Stratton271

When Odom dumped the responsibility- and his desk drawers- into John Parsons’s lap, the young chess player knew as much about producing live music as he had known about tending bar when the Maple Leaf opened its doors. However, this was not a significant disadvantage, because there wasn’t really anything for him to know. The local live music industry was being made up as it went along. They make guidebooks that explain how to mix drinks. In the mid-seventies, there were no guidebooks for operating a successful music club in New Orleans. Parsons only had his own instinct and ear to go on. As with the decision to have live music in the first place, business considerations influenced some of his moves. One thing the bottom line told him was that the Saturday night slot needed to be saved for acts that could draw better crowds than Andrew Hall’s Society Jazz Band.

[Andrew Hall] was a nice connection to a different era. He had musicians who went back to the early history of jazz. Of course the music did not appeal to the people who will keep a barroom strong. It appealed to a lot of academics... A three-dollar cover was like a lot of money to them. They would have one or two drinks and then

271 Jim Stratton, telephone interview with author, April 2017.
talk about being light-headed... Also, [his] set didn’t change much, and at a certain point... we just had to move on from that.

- Hank Staples272

Hall was devastated by the news. According to Jay Mazza, the Society’s Jazz Band’s Saturday night slot at the Maple Leaf had been “a significant part of (Englishman) Hall’s acceptance into the local music community.”273 Even decades later, Hall’s disappointment over losing the gig still resonates.

It was really the halcyon days of my musical life. I mean I’ve had a great many gigs; we were at the Columns Hotel for years. We were on the River for years. We were the house band at the Fairmont for years and at the Royal Sonesta for years. But losing that job to me was the biggest loss of a music job that I ever had. I mean, it wasn’t like it was a financial loss, but I don’t think I slept for a week when I lost that job.”

- Andrew Hall274

Writer Keith Spera later summed up the situation by saying, “...the Maple Leaf’s proprietors finally decided to do away with the Society Jazz Band’s free Saturday night show in favor of amplified bands with a cover charge...”275 Hank Staples elaborated on this by explaining that, “...for bar patrons, [the Society Jazz Band] was not the kind of music they wanted. That was a much younger crowd, and not as well-educated, and they wanted bands like the Radiators.”276

Dave Malone, Ed Volker, Reggie Scanlan, Frank Bua, and Camille Baudoin formed a rock n’ roll band and called themselves the Radiators in 1978. By 1980 they were already building a dedicated following of college students and assorted hippies

274 Mazza, Beat Street Magazine, 47.
275 Spera, “Long Live The Leaf.” (emphasis author’s)
by gigging constantly around town and playing marathon shows.\textsuperscript{277} The Radiators played at clubs like Jimmy’s, Jed’s, Tipitina’s, and the Dream Palace on Frenchman Street at least once or twice every month, in addition to their weekly Wednesday night slot at Luigi’s pizza parlor near the campus of UNO.\textsuperscript{278} Maple Leaf bartender and manager Tim Allspach was a big fan, and Hank is pretty sure that Tim is responsible for first bringing them to the Maple Leaf. The earliest \textit{Times-Picayune} listing of a Radiators show at the Maple Leaf is for Friday night, May 23, 1980.\textsuperscript{279} It might have been the first rock n’ roll show to take place at the Maple Leaf Bar. Reggie Scanlan, who had been Kurt Kasson’s bass player and was probably the first person to play an instrument through an amplifier on the Maple Leaf stage, was there to help to finish what he started back in 1974. According to Scanlan, the Radiators left their mark on the Maple Leaf with that first show.

\begin{quote}
So we were the first rock n’ roll band to play in there, and they had to build a larger stage for us. And also, all the waitresses quit that night because it was a total mob scene. We had, like, a thousand people… running through that place in the course of the night. It was totally, totally insane.

- Reggie Scanlan\textsuperscript{280}
\end{quote}

While decades may have inflated Reggie’s figures a bit (today the Leaf is fire coded at around 300\textsuperscript{281}), Tim Allspach made a point to note that in the early 80’s, the Radiators consistently drew the biggest crowds into the Maple Leaf “by far.”\textsuperscript{282} Although the Radiators never considered the Maple Leaf as their “home base,” they

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\textsuperscript{280} Reggie Scanlan, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 2017.
\textsuperscript{281} Ragan Wicker, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
\textsuperscript{282} Tim Allspach, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, May 2017.
\end{flushleft}
would take the stage at least once a month for the rest of the decade, playing marathon three-set shows late into the night. The Maple Leaf had always been open very late, and this often carried over into the performances. According to longtime Radiators fan and New Orleans music writer Jay Mazza, some of the musicians adopted the original owners’ ethos of not closing down until the last patron had left.

Today shows at the Maple Leaf run late in the sense they don’t start until 11 or 11:30, but you’d be hard pressed outside of Jazz Fest or Mardi Gras to be in there when there’s live music after 2. But back then you could go in there at two and they’d be on break between the second and their set. It might be an hour-long break. And depending on the crowd... I don’t know what it is with these musicians, whether it’s, I don’t know... It just seems like back then people weren’t on the clock so much. They played until it ended. It ended when the people went home. - Jay Mazza

Another amplified band that would soon follow in the footsteps of the Radiators was a short-lived group called The Cartoons. Illustrating the interconnectedness of the New Orleans music scene at the time, Cartoons singer and bass player Becky Kury had previously played bass for the Rhapsodizers, the precursor to the Radiators. Guitarist and future subdude Tommy Malone was the brother of Radiators frontman Dave Malone. The Cartoons didn’t quite rock like the Radiators- they played slightly hard-edged white R&B- but they plugged in and turned up and played some of their final shows on the Maple Leaf stage over the fall of 1980.

The new decade would also see new faces from outside the city of New Orleans on the Maple Leaf stage. Layfayette, Louisiana slide guitar virtuoso and future Louisiana Music Hall of Fame member Sonny Landreth was little more than a year removed from being the first and only white member of Zydeco King Clifton

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284 Mazza, Up Front and Center, 52-53.
Chenier’s Red Hot Louisiana Band when he found his way to the Riverbend neighborhood in the second half of 1982. Today Texas pianist Marcia Ball is a successful music industry veteran with nine Blues Music Awards, six Living Blues Awards, and five Grammy nominations to her name. But she was still more than a year away from releasing her breakthrough album *Soulful Dress* when she first appeared on the Maple Leaf stage at the end of the same year. R&B stalwart Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown had been performing professionally for almost four decades and was fresh off his own Grammy win in 1982 when he began playing the Maple Leaf in ’83 or ’84.

It was also during this time that a musician who would become a Maple Leaf fixture first came to Oak Street. Alton Rubin, Sr., known by his stage name Rockin’ Dopsie, was born in 1932 the small town of Carencro, just north of Lafayette in south-central Louisiana. Dopsie's first language was Louisiana Creole French. He began playing accordion in his teens and was playing clubs around Lafayette with his band the Zydeco Twisters by the early fifties. A contemporary of Zydeco King Clifton Chenier, Dopsie was part of the first generation of musicians to perform the music that was just beginning to be called Zydeco.

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One band I really enjoyed, and I kind of was responsible for getting them hired there, because John Parsons used to do the booking. I told him, "Why doesn't Rockin' Dopsie play in here?" Clifton Chenier was the King of Zydeco, he would play across the street at Jed's, and sometimes the whole band would come in and sit by the door just to drink in the break. People knew about Clifton Chenier, but he was so big that Rockin' Dopsie was kind of in the shadows. At that point he had been playing a few times in Europe, so people knew about him in Europe and I'd heard him on the radio. I suggested to John Parsons to get Rockin' Dopsie, and they put Dopsie on. That was a big, I don't think they could afford Clifton Chenier. Clifton Chenier played at Jed's anyway, but they got Rockin' Dopsie, and that was really good, that took off. I used to really dig, they had a really good tenor player in that band, John Hart, who had been in Clifton's band before. He would play, and there was a guy called Shorty that played the rub-board who was really entertaining.

- Jon Cleary

The oldest music listing in the Times-Picayune for a Rockin' Dopsie show at the Maple Leaf is for Saturday night, December 5, 1981. The Society Jazz Band had been let go that summer, and Parsons had so far kept Saturday night open to book around. Like Cajun music, Zydeco wasn't completely unknown in New Orleans at the time, but it was close. The occasional Clifton Chenier date was about it.

There was possibly no one better poised at that time to be the Zydeco trailblazer of New Orleans than Rockin' Dopsie. In a 1992 profile for *Offbeat Magazine*, writer Rick Coleman noted that, "...Rockin' Dopsie (pronounced ROCK-in DOOP-see) ...is the only Zydeco artist to have led a powerhouse band continuously-playing mostly tiny clubs up until 1979- since the wondrous rockin' music of the black Louisiana Frenchmen first surfaced nearly 40 years ago." When Dopsie arrived at the Maple Leaf he was almost 50 years old, and had been performing professionally for 30 of them. He was a master showman and his Zydeco Twisters were a hot band. Within a year he would claim Saturday night as his own, moving to Friday sometime around the middle of the decade. Much like Cajun night, Dopsie's

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291 Rick Coleman, “Rockin’ Dopsie Rules.”
shows were instrumental in forging the Maple Leaf’s identity as the place to see authentic Louisiana music in the city of New Orleans.

Dopsie performed at the Maple Leaf most every weekend until shortly before his death in 1993. Even as his career began to take off in the late eighties- when he appeared on albums with Paul Simon, Bob Dylan, and Cindy Lauper- Dopsie remained loyal to Oak Street. “Even thought I sell 25 million copies,” he told Coleman in the same profile, “I’m still gonna come to the Maple Leaf, ‘cause it really made me in New Orleans... Every Friday when I come it’s a packed house. I was thinkin’ about movin’ down here...” At this point the interview is interrupted by a woman “with a decidedly French accent.” “You better not move down here! You better stay in my country where you come from!”

There is a video available on the internet of Rockin’ Dopsie performing at the Maple Leaf in 1984. He’s dressed in a dark suit and wearing his trademark red velvet cape and crown. Playing his button accordion upside-down (he’s left-handed and that’s how he learned), he leads a six-piece band through the dance tune “Louisiana Two Step.” Dopsie croons the French Cajun lyrics into a golden microphone as beads of sweat run down from his crown. When the camera pulls back, four young-ish couples can be glimpsed dancing in front of the stage, two-stepping and spinning one another around. The footage is shot professionally with multiple cameras. It’s well lit and the details of the bar come through quite well. The pattern on the pressed tin on the walls is sharp, and distinct even on the ceiling in

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292 Coleman, “Rockin’ Dopsie Rules.”
underneath shots. The only ornamentation on the stage is a large black sign with “Maple Leaf Bar” in gold lettering that hangs on the back wall between the windows.

This footage is actually part of a 10 song, 47-minute performance that was filmed at the Maple Leaf on Saturday March 20, 1984. The whole thing can be seen on an out-of-print DVD called *Rockin’ Dopsie and the Zydeco Twisters In New Orleans*, released in 2003 by a Danish label called Storyville Records.\(^{294}\) Also released in 2003 by Storyville (and also out of print) is a DVD of a performance by Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown shot at the Maple Leaf on February 4, 1984, almost two months before the Dopsie show. Titled *The Blues of Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown*, this is a 50-minute performance that shows the veteran entertainer- singing into the same golden microphone- backed by a nine-piece band (including three saxophones!) for 11 songs.\(^{295}\)

The source of the video is a television series called “Music City” that ran on the local Cox Cable channel from 1983 through 1986. Produced by Jim Gabour, an early evangelist of New Orleans musical culture, “Music City” was a 59-episode\(^{296}\) local concert series that was described by the *Times-Picayune* as “a virtual music archive, a comprehensive video record of New Orleans musicians, from jazz to gospel to rock to reggae to rhythm & blues.”\(^{297}\) The most well-known recording from the series is probably a nearly-hour long solo performance by James Booker,

\(^{296}\) This depends on where you look. Other sources list it as a “52 episode” or “47 part” series.
recorded on the Maple Leaf on Saturday night, October 28, 1983, eleven days before he died. Although there were around 70,000 New Orleans homes wired for cable when the show was on the air, Gabour would later tell a reporter, “I wouldn’t bet that 50 people in this town ever saw one of those shows. People here have grown up with this music for so long that it has become invisible.”\(^ {298}\) Not even winning five ACE Awards— the cable TV Emmys of the time—ever did much for local interest. Gabour did garner some minor national exposure when he edited down some “Music City” performances into four 1-hour episodes that ran in 1986 on the Arts & Entertainment Network under the name “New Orleans Now.”\(^ {299}\) By all accounts, this was the first appearance of the Maple Leaf on national television.

The only other known “Music City” performance recorded at the Maple Leaf was Li’l Queenie and the Skin Twins, the band John Parsons hired to replace James Booker on Tuesday nights when he disappeared for a couple of weeks in late 1982. Li’l Queenie and the Skin Twins was Leigh “Li’l Queenie” Harris on vocals, former George Porter, Jr. guitarist Bruce “Weasel” McDonald (who was married to Harris at the time), and future subdude John Magnie on keyboards. Local music writer Spike Perkins would later describe them as, “funky and eclectic,” adding, “it was hard to believe that a band without bass and drums would have people up dance, but dance they did.”\(^ {300}\) Li’l Queenie and the Skin Twins would hold the Tuesday night slot until early 1985.

\(^{298}\) Mark Lorando, “Play That Funky Music, White Boy!”
Amazingly, Jim Gabour and his Cox Cable crew may not have been the first people to film a performance at the Maple Leaf. In May of 1982, *Times-Picayune* gossip columnist Betty Gillaud ran a story about an upcoming trip to France by the New Orleans Repertory Jazz Ensemble (LRJE) where she noted that “French television has already filmed the ensemble in New Orleans at the Maple Leaf Bar on Oak Street where they’ve been playing every Wednesday night since the group was formed two years ago.” LRJE had been formed in 1980 by a group of Tulane University professors and administrators that wanted to play traditional New Orleans music. By “traditional” they meant they had no interest in the Dixieland that was being performed for tourists in the French Quarter. These men wanted to go further back, playing only music from the 1920’s and before. After rehearsing for a few weeks in an empty auditorium on campus at Tulane, someone suggested that they contact the Maple Leaf. “The first night we played,” remembered bandleader Fred Starr, “the place filled up. For the first time in eons in New Orleans, there was a place you could dance to this music. Within two weeks you had not only the uptown establishment, but you also had the funkiest people from the neighborhood spilling beer on each other’s shoes.” Echoing the sentiments of the Society Jazz Band members, banjoist John Chaffe explained, “The music that we play, which is the classic New Orleans jazz, has always been for dancing and less formal occasions. The Maple Leaf is a perfect setting for this kind of music, if you take into account many of

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the places where classic jazz was originally played. It's like coming home, in a sense.”

It is interesting to note that the members of the LRJE point to the dancers when discussing why the Maple Leaf was so well suited for their music and such a good place for them to perform. This almost seems out of character, that a group of academics so rigorously devoted to faithfully performing antiquated music would be concerned with anything beyond their own timing and tone. But it illuminates their true understanding and appreciation of the participatory traditions in which this music was developed, and how the small bar on Oak Street could inspire the same dynamic.

The LRJE played their first show at the Maple Leaf in May of 1980 and performed there every Wednesday until early 1983, when they moved to Munster's Dance Hall and Bar on Laurel Street (former home club of trumpeter Tony Fougerat, who had passed away in 1980). Even though their time there was short, the LRJE loved the Maple Leaf and wore their weekly gig like a badge of honor. Their affection was infectious. While the footage from the French television special is probably lost to time, the “What The Critics Say” page on the LRJE website has a translated quote from **ATLAS**, the in-flight magazine of Air France that reads, “If you search a little (in New Orleans) you will find your way to the Maple Leaf Bar on Oak Street, where each Tuesday and Wednesday the young musicians of the Louisiana Repertory Jazz Ensemble make it possible for one to hear the most perfectly restored jazz of

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Storyville. It is there that the New Orleanians themselves go to dance to their music.”

The LRJE even spread the word behind the Iron Curtain. Through a series of events that merit their own scholarly investigation, the LRJE toured the Soviet Union in January of 1983. On the penultimate stop of the tour, they performed three concerts in Moscow. The third was for a crowd of more than 3,500 at the Union of Soviet Composers building. It was a command performance for Soviet symphony musicians. At one point Starr told the crowd that he hoped he would be able to return the favor one day by inviting a Soviet jazz group to the United States.

Speaking in fluent Russian (Starr spent two years at Leningrad University), he said, “Since we don’t have a Union of Composers, I can invite them only to the Maple Leaf Bar. The place is sort of grubby and certainly not as elegant as this, but there are free drinks on the house.” According to a Washington Post reporter in attendance, “The crowd roared.”

The Post reporter who had seen the LRJE in Moscow reached out to John Parsons for a quote. “They have a large following and we’re pleased to have them,” he told the reporter, then adding, “We try to stick to the ‘home-grown’ New Orleans theme, so the Ensemble fits right in.” For the Maple Leaf, becoming a showcase for the music of Louisiana was no more intentional than becoming a music club had been. Like a lot of things at 8316 Oak Street, it just kind of “happened.” Bethell wanted a traditional jazz band for opening night. Carl Brown wanted a Cajun band for a political fundraiser. Cleary suggested Dopsie. LRJE called them. Pieces fell into

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place. “This is a perfect example of watching a field grow,” reflects current owner Hank Staples. “You have a field, and it’s there, and there isn’t much on it. And if you really don’t do anything to it, it might be surprising, first how lush it becomes, but also how it grows in ways you didn’t imagine.”

Part of it was born out of necessity; having weekly performers means drawing mostly from local talent. The bar’s small size was a factor as well. Many talented acts that couldn’t fill larger rooms like Tipitina’s or Jimmy’s found the Maple Leaf suited them nicely. Specialty music, like Zydeco, or ragtime, or traditional jazz, drew small crowds but had devoted fans. The Maple Leaf was also a place where musicians from successful bands would try out new material and side projects, such as when Ed Volker and Reggie Scanlan from the Radiators teamed up with singer and percussionist Glen “Kul” Sears to form Blind, Cripple, and Crazy. They played stripped-down acoustic blues every other Monday at the Maple Leaf during the summer of 1981.

Mostly however, the musical direction of the Maple Leaf was guided by John Parsons’s ear.

Yeah, [booking music] took me a while to learn. I always liked music... The bands started coming to us, mainly. And then they started sending me tapes and I would listen to a lot of them and research a lot... My own ear was the main thing at first... just my own ear, my own taste. I would go to other clubs, and I would go to the Jazz Festival. I would do a lot of listening and research at first... The bands, mostly, the would come to us. Mostly they would bring a tape, a promotional package, and I would listen to them. Later, I got so I could tell within a few moments whether I wanted to use them or not.

- John Parsons

Current owner Hank Staples rarely misses a chance to praise Parsons’s musical instincts when discussing the history of the Maple Leaf.

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Where [Parsons was] different is that he could really pick talent. When he sold his shares in the Maple Leaf (in 1995), I took over booking. I can’t go out, hear three bands, and say, “This is the better band.” He could. If you look at the bands he chose, they are local bands who over time are multiple Grammy winners. So the legacy Parsons left me was a stable of top-quality musicians.

- Hank Staples

John Parsons may have trusted his ear to guide whom he put on the Maple Leaf stage, but he also trusted the bottom line to guide whom he brought back. “My general rule was about six weeks,” he explains. “If a band didn’t start drawing within six weeks, then I knew they weren’t going to.”

The decision to book weekly residencies was significant in shaping the Maple Leaf’s reputation as a place to see “home-grown Louisiana music.” It also set the Maple Leaf apart from contemporaries such as Jed’s, Jimmy’s, and Tipitina’s, places that offered that offered different (if similar) musicians nightly. Weekly residencies identified the Maple Leaf with particular types music—particularly Cajun and Zydeco—that might have been performed elsewhere in the city, but not with the same regularity. The Maple Leaf’s reputation as the place to dance to Cajun music didn’t stem from the nights when the Balfa Brothers or Beausoleil performed, although those shows certainly bolstered it. That reputation came from Cajun night. It came from being the one place in the city that was guaranteed to have live Cajun music at least one night a week. New Orleanians who enjoyed Cajun dancing knew that they didn’t have to check newspaper listings, or get on a mailing list, or call the club to find out if and when they could come two-step. Just go to the Maple Leaf on Thursday. It’s Cajun night. These weekly performances not only set the Maple Leaf apart from their contemporaries.

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contemporaries, they also probably contributed to the bar’s longevity by shielding it from some of the ups and downs inherent to the live music business.

This practice was beneficial to the musicians as well. The stability offered by regular, guaranteed pay has been discussed before and cannot be overstated. Regular gigs also teach music industry newcomers how to become working musicians and help seasoned pros keep their skills sharp.

Those regular gigs were our training ground. Where we really learned our instruments. We really learned what it was like to be in a band, to show up nightly or weekly and play the same material over and over again. And perfect it. Develop new material. Really experience the full phenomenon of becoming a musician, becoming a band member. Dealing with all the inter-personal politics, in the case of [Kurt Kasson and the Wheeler Sisters], gender relations that were a part of it. All of which was a huge learning experience for all of us.

- Bruce Raeburn

[A regular] gig is great just in a mechanical sense in that it always keeps the band... you’re always turning the engine over. If you have a little gap in other gigs or something, you always got that one, so that when you have a big clump of gigs coming up, you haven’t had three weeks off of not playing. Because playing music, it’s one of those things, like, you have to do it over and over to be convinced you can still do it. You need constant reinforcement. If not, psychologically it starts to creep in. It’s like, “Oh, it’s been a while since I did that.” You start to get a little apprehensive.

I have this friend who’s a great artist, great singer, but he never played enough gigs to get over the thing of anxiety about any one particular gig. So, any gig he would play, he would always be nervous like a week ahead of time. The only way to get over that is just play 1,000 gigs and then you don’t care.

It’s like you get desensitized to the anxiety, which is a natural part of performance. You’re totally exposed. This is your identity you’re representing. The level of accuracy that you have to have to be seen as legitimate or to feel good about yourself is so much higher than almost anything else. Like baseball, it’s very low. If you have 30% success at the mound, you’re in the Hall of Fame. If you have 30% success at the bandstand, you don’t get on the bandstand. If you have 95% success on the bandstand, you work at Kinney Shoes or you have to have another job. You have to have a high level of accuracy and you also have a level of comfort to even want to keep doing it. If you have anxiety every time, it’s too much. You won’t want to keep that up. It’s natural ... You will develop an aversion to it.

Yeah, having a steady gig, it’s nice.

- René Coman

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312 Bruce Raeburn, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
By the time the ill-fated Louisiana Exposition World’s Fair opened just after The Jazz and Heritage Festival in May of 1984, the Maple Leaf was well on its way to becoming an Uptown institution. The *Times-Picayune* ran a series of articles over the opening weekend aimed at World’s Fair visitors, and the Maple Leaf was mentioned in at least two of them. The first, titled “Live Music Abounds in The City’s Nightclubs,” mentioned the Maple Leaf in a section about Uptown bars, noting, “Poets, Cajun bands, the ghosts of James Booker and Roosevelt Sykes, pressed tin ceilings, and a casual atmosphere prevail.”\(^\text{314}\) The next day, the paper ran a story titled “Big Easy Is Easy To Decipher” that didn’t mention the bar in the copy, but a large picture of it accompanied the story. Captioned “The Maple Leaf Bar in Uptown New Orleans is a favorite hangout for lovers of Cajun music,” it is a wide shot of the barroom made from the back wall facing towards the street. *Times-Picayune* photographer Ellis Lucia made the photograph during the day, and the light from outside casts the whole interior into the shadows. The pressed tin on the wall and the ceiling is striking, even in the microfiche reproduction, and the stage is clearly visible through the aperture in the wall. A figure that appears to be a man is in the foreground, sitting at the bar drawing on a cigarette with a beer in front of him. Three more patrons and the bartender are at the far end of the bar, mostly washed out by the light from the windows. The room very much has the feel of a tunnel.\(^\text{315}\)

Something else happened in 1984 that would cement the Maple Leaf’s status among Uptown music clubs. Tipitina’s closed. Located about halfway between the

Maple Leaf and downtown New Orleans at the corner of Napoleon and Tchoupitoulas, Tiptina’s opened in 1977 as a music club. A group of music fans specifically wanted a place for the New Orleans R&B legends they loved to be able to perform, particularly Professor Longhair. While the Maple Leaf had been opened by six academics and writers with no experience running a bar, Tipitina’s had been opened by fourteen hippies who also had no experience running a bar. By 1984, financial realities collided with a fractured leadership structure and the party was over. Tipitina’s closed in June of that year. According to Hank Staples, that was a turning point in the life of the Maple Leaf.

When we first became really well-known for music, as opposed to just having it because business seemed to be better when we had bands than when it was just so-called “Talk Night,” was when Tip’s (Tipitina’s) closed. Then we started getting [bigger] bands [more often]. And of course, those nights, for what this place was used to, were enormous. I mean phenomenal... I think that’s when it transitioned from a bar that had music to a music club.

- Hank Staples

As the 1980’s progressed, the Maple Leaf began to cement its identity not only as a great live music club, but also as a prominent local business that was involved in the community. In August of 1985 the community radio station WWOZ, which had broadcast from the second floor of Tipitina’s until the club closed the year before, used the Maple Leaf as the venue for the first of three “Mid-Summer Dream Concerts,” which were fundraisers for the listener-supported station. Each show would feature a different strain of Louisiana music; unsurprisingly, the Maple Leaf date showcased Cajun music, with Allen Fontenot and the Country Cajuns.

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performing. The following month was the 150\textsuperscript{th} birthday of the St. Charles Avenue streetcar line, which was celebrated on Saturday, September 28 with a parade of “twenty-nine trolleys, trimmed with balloons and birthday banners.” Each trolley car was packed with passengers who threw beads and doubloons to the assembled crowd along the route from Lafayette Square in the CBD to the Street Car Barn (where the streetcars are stored and serviced) on Willow Street in Uptown. The whole city got in on the party, and the merchants along Oak Street (which is two blocks from Willow Street) were no exception. According to the \textit{Times-Picayune}, “On Oak Street, children had their faces painted and their hair streaked in wild color combinations. The Riverside Ramblers, a six-piece jazz band, played from the balcony above the Maple Leaf Bar, then descended the stairs and began playing and parading down the sidewalk.”

Never reluctant to turn its space over to a good cause, the bar has hosted numerous fundraisers for causes philanthropic, political, cultural, and quasi-respectable. The Maple Leaf participated in a multi-club, multi-band “crosstown jam” fundraiser in August of 1986 benefiting the New Orleans Music and Entertainment Association, an attempt by the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce “to bring musicians and local businessmen together” in an attempt to “upgrade the professionalism of the local music industry.” How successful this effort was remains unknown. On Sunday, December 9, 1990 the Amigos of Ecumenical

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\begin{enumerate}
  \item “Calendar,” \textit{Times-Picayune}, Aug. 8, 1985, Sec. G.
  \item Gayle Ashton, “Streetcar Birthday Is Ticket To Fun,” \textit{Times-Picayune}, Sept. 29, 1985, Sec. 1.
  \item “17-Band ‘Crosstown Jam’ To Benefit Musicians’ Group,” \textit{Times-Picayune}, Aug 13, 1986, Sec. B.
\end{enumerate}
Immigration Services, a nondenominational religious organization that provided legal services to the Latin American community in New Orleans, held a “Dance For Freedom” fundraiser at the Maple Leaf. Entertainment was provided by “Los Iguanas,” who were just beginning what would become a remarkably successful Sunday night residency on the Oak Street stage.\textsuperscript{321} Not every good cause is charitable, however. Some are just fun, such as when the fledgling Abita Beer held its second anniversary party at the Maple Leaf in July of 1988.\textsuperscript{322}

The 1980’s also saw the beginning of the Krewe of OAK, a neighborhood Mardi Gras krewe that begins and ends its two yearly parades at the Maple Leaf. (disclosure: the author is a member of the Krewe of OAK) The krewe has its origins in an event called “Midsummer Mardi Gras,” a yearly costume party that took place at the end of August at various homes around the Carrollton neighborhood in the 70’s and 80’s. The parties were so wild and destructive that nobody ever wanted to host one twice, so when they ran out of houses the group decided to turn the celebration into a costumed bar crawl. Every year, more and more revelers showed up in costume to join the fun. The difference between “drunkenly roaming the streets in costume” and “Mardi Gras parade” is one of degree, and that degree is small, so the group decided to formalize their little event in 1982. They called themselves the Krewe of OAK, which many assume alludes to the krewe’s Oak Street home base but krewe members insist stands for “Outrageous And Kinky,” and inaugurated a second parade to take place during Carnival season. Today, the krewe


\textsuperscript{322} Rosemary Weatherly, “Abita Town Talk Column,” \textit{Times-Picayune}, June 26, 1988, Sec. H.
continues to host two parades annually, one on the final Friday of Carnival and the other on the last Saturday in August. The krewe still invites anyone who comes in costume to join the parade and as a result, the parades have grown steadily through the years. Because there is so much to do in the city during Carnival, that parade is still relatively small, unleashing only a few hundred revelers into the streets of Carrollton. On the final weekend of August, however, the city of New Orleans is effectively on vacation and the numbers are substantially larger. Recent Midsummer Mardi Gras parades have seen 10,000+ costumed freaks dancing through the streets of the Uptown neighborhood.

A new face turned up on the streets Carrollton in 1983 belonging to a man that made a lasting impact on Oak Street and the Maple Leaf Bar. Hank Staples was born and raised in Washington, D.C., and came to New Orleans via New York City. He was only intending to stay for a few weeks, and then continuing on to Central America. He never left. His original notion was that he would write screenplays, and so he spent time walking the streets of New Orleans gathering inspiration.

I was living over on Pine Street, and I was also taking some classes at Tulane, and I thought... I enjoyed barrooms and alcohol so much. I was looking for a place to drink, and I was just walking around the whole area. I had never heard of Oak Street, but I came onto Oak Street and... The Maple Leaf in those days opened at noon, and it was like 1:30 or 2:00 in the afternoon, but it's a bar that was open. So I came in, had a drink. Actually I had several. That was how I found the Maple Leaf.

- Hank Staples

Hank initially got a job tending bar at Jed's University Inn, but he would spend his off hours across the street drinking at the Maple Leaf. He spent so many hours there that he started sleeping upstairs, initially on a cot on the back porch of the apartment (which was occupied by Bill Maddox, Everette's brother, at the time). He soon got the apartment to himself. Hank's first job at the Maple Leaf consisted of
intermittent door work and bar backing; gradually he was able to acquire more and more shifts. In 1987 he landed a job tending bar at the Maple Leaf. He has remained ever since.

The final year of the decade brought with it a milestone. In February of 1989, the Maple Leaf celebrated its fifteenth birthday. The bar marked the occasion by turning back the clock. Andrew Hall’s Society Jazz Band performed and there was no cover charge. The *Times-Picayune* even covered the occasion, sending writer Jeff Hannusch to interview John Parsons about the club’s longevity. In the piece titled “Maple Leaf Chalks Up 15 Years of Hometown Music,” Hannusch made the point that, “While Parsons claims there are no secrets to running a live-music venue, the fact remains that the Maple Leaf has thrived while dozens of other music clubs have opened and closed.” Parsons looked at things simply. “People who come to the Maple Leaf like Louisiana music,” he explained to the reporter. “Blues, Cajun, zydeco- they don’t like stuff that sounds homogenous.” When Hannusch asked him what’s in store for the next 15 years at the Maple Leaf, Parsons just laughed. “Don’t expect any big changes around here. I’m happy with the way things are going. We’ve got a formula that works, so why change things?”

But while things may have been going well inside the friendly confines of 8316 Oak Street, outside the neighborhood Carrollton was deteriorating and becoming more and more dangerous.

Back then, the early nineties, it was Muddy Waters and it was the Maple Leaf and that was it. I... couldn't even tell you what other businesses were around there. And if you went where... On the next corner there... that's Cambronne. You didn't go past

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323 Hannusch, “Maple Leaf Chalks Up 15 Years of Hometown Music.”
Cambronne. It was dangerous. That whole area back there, heading towards Jeff Parish, we used to call that the Hole. Once you [got] past about the 8200 block on any of those streets off of Carrollton, you [were] taking a risk.

- Dave Jordan

In October of 1990, a nineteen-year-old man named Ronald L. Dickens began a weeklong crime spree that would terrify the neighborhood and leave one family without a son. The first incident occurred at 2 a.m. on Saturday, October 20. A Loyola student and her boyfriend were leaving the Maple Leaf after catching Rockin’ Dopsie’s Friday night show. As they approached her car, which was parked in a lot at the corner of Oak and Cambronne, they saw that it had been burglarized and there were two men standing beside it. The two men were Ronald L. Dickens and twenty-four year-old Robert Houghton. Houghton brandished a pistol. The men forced the couple into the car and made them drive to a bank and withdraw money from the automated teller machine. After that, they drove to an empty warehouse in Uptown where they assaulted the woman, then stole the couple’s car, leaving them battered and frightened, but alive.

The following Thursday, October 25, Tulane graduate student Chris Ciaccio was on his way to the Maple Leaf for Cajun night. The 27-year-old son of an appellate court judge had just completed a Cajun dance course the week before, and was meeting a friend at the bar that night to test out his new moves. As he was pulling into a space in the same parking lot at the corner of Oak and Cambronne around 10:40, he saw two men- Ronald L. Dickens and 18-year-old Chris Lewis-approaching on a bicycle (Lewis was riding on the handlebars). According to Dickens’s statement to the police, Lewis, who was carrying a gun, jumped off the

bike and ran towards Ciaccio’s car intending to rob him. Ciaccio apparently saw the
men approaching and put the car in reverse to try and get away. Lewis opened fire.
Police think he got off four or five shots. Two of the bullets struck Ciaccio. The car
raced backwards wildly, knocking over an iron fence and slamming into a telephone
pole across the street before it came to a stop. A cook from a nearby restaurant
heard the shots and ran to the car, but Ciaccio died within seconds of him arriving
on the scene.

The very next night, Dickens, with Houghton again, kidnapped another
couple and stole two more cars, the second being a Toyota, which Dickens
eventually abandoned near the corner of Dante and Spruce Streets, about a block
from his own home.

They were caught quickly. Actually, they parked [the Toyota] in front of Julie Kane's
house. Julie Kane, the poet. One of her neighbors... God bless old ladies with nothing
to do. She saw that the car was parked there. She saw the guys leave it, and she right
off the bat is worried. The car is there for a few days and she called the police and
that's how they broke the case.

- Hank Staples

Dickens, Lewis, and Houghton were convicted on multiple counts and all three were
sentenced to spend the rest of their lives in Angola. But their spree left a mark on all
of Uptown. The Maple Leaf, where more than half of the victims had been going to or
coming from, began employing off-duty police officers as security.

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Ch. 7 - MAKE WAY FOR THE REBIRTH

In hindsight, it is not the tragedy for which 1990 is conspicuous. On Oak Street 1990 is distinguished by a new beginning. August of 1990 marked the genesis of what has become one of the longest-running musical traditions in the city of New Orleans. When Rebirth Jazz Band (as they were called at the time) first took the stage at the Maple Leaf on August 7, 1990, there was little fanfare. As longtime New Orleans live music fan Jay Mazza explains in his book Up Front And Center, "It was a Tuesday night, and the gig was a fill-in on the schedule since the club didn't have anyone else available to play during the dog says of summer." By the time summer turned to fall, Rebirth had the Tuesday night slot locked down. As of this writing, they still do. At 27 years and counting, Rebirth Tuesday at the Maple Leaf is the best-known, longest-running musical appointment in the city. Hotel concierges send guests there. Cab drivers recommend it to tourists looking to venture outside the French Quarter. It’s where denizens of the city take visitors to show them the “real New Orleans.” Every Tuesday- traditionally not a great night for music clubs, or bars of any nature- the Maple Leaf packs out with a mixture of tourists, hipsters, downtown business people, Tulane students, and a smattering of locals, all ready, all willing, all waiting, to get down, get funky, and “make way for the Rebirth!”

326 Mazza, Up Front and Center, 163.
For the first five years of their existence, the Rebirth Brass Band (then called Rebirth Jazz Band) gigged relentlessly, often playing multiple gigs in one day. They did this mostly in their own neighborhood of Tremé. They played funeral processions, second line parades, house parties, apartment parties, even pool parties, but they rarely played clubs. This changed in the spring of 1987, when they began performing on Thursday nights at the Glass House on South Saratoga Street.\(^{327}\) The Glass House was a rickety little bar in a fairly dangerous Central City neighborhood; it was also the club where the Dirty Dozen had performed weekly since the late seventies.

When the Dirty Dozen Brass Band formed in 1977, most working brass band musicians in New Orleans were already collecting Social Security. The Dirty Dozen were a much-needed shot of youth and creativity into a culture that was stagnating and beginning to die out. They also updated the brass band style by adding elements of be-bop and old-school R&B. For years they blazed this trail alone, until 1983 when seven high school kids who idolized the Dirty Dozen decided to form their own band and called themselves Rebirth. By the middle of the decade, the Dirty Dozen’s career began to take off, and their success began to carry them farther and farther away from New Orleans for longer and longer periods of time. Meanwhile Rebirth were becoming the in-demand brass band in New Orleans for people who didn’t want to hire off the senior tour. Rebirth’s assumption of the Dirty Dozen’s Glass House residency was rightly seen by many as a passing of the torch.

\(^{327}\) Mazza, *Up Front and Center*. 92.
Rebirth’s weekly gigs at the Glass House developed quite a boisterous reputation, which is why John Parson’s girlfriend thought he should check them out in the summer of 1990.\textsuperscript{328} Parsons liked what he saw and hired them on the spot to play the Maple Leaf the following week. Rebirth played their first gig at the Maple Leaf five days later on August 7. By the end of the following month, the Tuesday night slot was theirs. Many of their Glass House crowd followed the band uptown. “While the Maple Leaf’s patrons had seen [their] fair share of wild dancing at shows,” writes Jay Mazza, “nothing could prepare them for the full-on house shaking that accompanied every Rebirth gig.”

The dance floor directly in front of the stage was ground zero for the dancers. They came in all shapes and sizes with the one constant being that they were all quite young. This was a new style of dancing that coupled the old traditional second line steps with newer moves combining elements of break dancing and hip-hop. The dance floor was an opportunity to cut loose, and there was an informal pecking order based on who had the best moves. Jerry Anderson... was one of the leaders. His style was hyper-kinetic- he would spin like a ballet dancer, do splits, jump up and then step so quickly that his feet were a blur.

Sometimes, the dancers would get into cutting contests and a circle would open up in the middle of the dance floor. The two combatants would be in the middle of the circle, and the crowd would gather around and egg each of them on higher and higher while the horns screamed. The informal winner would usually be the dancer with the most stamina. This style of dancing is often referred to as “buck jumping.”

- Jay Mazza\textsuperscript{329}

This is just the reaction that Rebirth wanted from the crowd. In fact, they tailored their music to elicit it. According to anthropologist Matt Sakakeeny, “every aspect of tempo and rhythm, melody and repertoire, improvisation and repetition is strategically executed with the purpose of moving audiences.”\textsuperscript{330} This comes from the second line tradition of street parades, explains Rebirth bass drummer Keith

\textsuperscript{328} John Parsons, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
\textsuperscript{329} Mazza, \textit{Up Front and Center}, 164.
\textsuperscript{330} Sakakeeny, \textit{Roll With It}, 22.
Frazier, who is the band’s co-leader with his brother Philip. If the tempo gets too slow, Keith explained, “it gets kind of boring, and people start standing around.”

According to Philip Frazier, the notoriously acoustically challenged Maple Leaf is just suited for a good brass band sound. “Small places sound real good for the tuba,” he explained to a reporter in 2004, “because the sound bounces off the walls, bounces off the people, and it sounds deep. When a place is too big, you have to amplify.” It would be fourteen years before Rebirth would start using microphones at their Maple Leaf gigs. They also preferred to play with the stage lights off, and would frequently unscrew the bare bulbs that lit the Maple Leaf stage before they began to play.

As Rebirth has grown more comfortable with the Maple Leaf over the years, they have surrendered some of their control over the music and to the room and the crowd. “It’s a home place,” Keith Frazier once told a reporter. “We feel like we can do anything here. We made a mistake? So what. It felt good. Do it again!”

The band no longer rehearses- it tries out new material in front of its fans on Tuesday night. Often Phil will play a fresh bass line and the rest of the players gradually come in with their own ideas. Or they’ll play a Rebirth classic like “Do Whatcha Wanna” in an entirely different way, and it turns into a new song.

- Ken Korman

331 Sakakeeny, Roll With It, 23.
335 Ken Korman, “Interview: Rebirth Brass Band.”
“We try to be spontaneous and let it happen,” Philip Frazier once said in an interview. “We can see if people like it- the raw energy of the crowd.”

As noted before, Rebirth’s weekly gig at the Maple Leaf is the most well known musical appointment in the city. It has also been a financial boon for both parties. One of the Maple Leaf’s markers for a successful band is when a second bartender has to be added to the shift to help with the long front bar. According to Hank Staples, it took Rebirth a couple of years to need that second bartender- it is Tuesday night, after all- but they have maintained that level of success ever since. In fact, Rebirth Brass Band shows at the Maple Leaf have been so successful they no longer rely on the bar’s guarantee. “We don’t take the door; they take the door,” explains bartender Ragan Wicker. “That’s the only night where we give up our autonomy as a bar and they take the door.”

Rebirth actually brings in their own people to work the door. Typically, it’s manned by the Frazier brothers’ sisters.

According to Jay Mazza, Rebirth’s Maple Leaf gigs have also served as a seminar of sorts for the next generation of New Orleans horn players. “One of the most interesting aspects of the early days of Rebirth at the Maple Leaf,” he writes, “was the nearly constant presence of a group of young, mostly underage black musicians standing nearly motionless either at the very front or just off to the side of the stage. They weren’t drinking or partying in any way. They were studying.”

Another band that began performing at the Maple Leaf in the summer of 1990 was the Iguanas. Today the Iguanas are one of New Orleans’s most established

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336 Ken Korman, “Interview: Rebirth Brass Band.”
and beloved bands, having played together for more than a quarter of a century. Their music has been featured in numerous films and on television. They’ve won five *Gambit* Big Easy Awards and another five *Offbeat* Best of The Beat Awards. But the first time John Parsons saw the Iguanas, they were the backing band for Jumpin’ Johnny Sansone, a blues singer and harmonica player. They were ready then to break off and start making their own music. Parsons decided to give them a chance and booked them around the same time he booked Rebirth. An article in the August 17, 1990 edition of the *Times-Picayune* identifies both the Iguanas and Rebirth as part of a floating “mixed bag” of bands that would perform on Tuesdays and Wednesday in the late summer. By that fall, the Iguanas would be the regular Sunday night band at the Maple Leaf. “They were just beginning to build a following and define their sound,” wrote Spike Perkins in a Maple Leaf retrospective for *Beat Street Magazine* in 2004. “Eventually normally slow Sunday nights turned into a social event.”

Rick Koster described the Iguanas’ sound as “a magical amalgam of Mex-pop, tropical rock, honky-Tex, and Swamp R&B.” Whatever it was, it caught on quickly. “It started off as kind of a sleepy night,” notes Iguanas bassist René Coman. This was to be expected, as Sundays are traditionally dead nights in the music club business, much like Tuesdays. But there was “a natural kind of expansion of the band’s

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popularity at the same time,” Coman explains, “where within a few months we had
100 people at the Maple Leaf on Sunday night... By the peak of us playing there... it
would be so crowded, they couldn’t put anybody else in there. There’d be people all
the way back to the patio sometimes.”344 A 1993 article in *Offbeat Magazine*
explained, “This weekly Maple Leaf gig is most popular with musicians, negligent
students, the underemployed and anyone else who, for whatever reason, doesn’t
give a damn about Monday morning.”345

One barstool theory about the popularity of the Iguanas’ Sunday gigs was
that women really liked the smooth, Mexican-tinged groove of the Iguanas’ sound.
And where women go, men follow (which is why bars have “ladies’ night” specials
rather than “men’s night”). According to long-time Maple Leaf bartender and patron
Chris Jones, Hank Staples had a well-known expression. “[The reason] why the
Iguanas are so popular is because the women can dance and they think it’s romantic
like they’re underneath the moon in Mexico, and the guys are going, ‘I’m gonna get
laid!’ I’m paraphrasing,” laughs Jones, “but it was true.”346 Maple Leaf regular
Stephen Novak seems to back this up. He was living in Baton Rouge at the time. “A
buddy that had already moved from Baton Rouge... to New Orleans came back and
played Frisbee with us and said, ‘Man, you got to go to the Maple Leaf on Sunday
night. It’s babe fest. It’s the Iguanas.”347

345 Michael Tisserand, “Iguanas of The Night,” *Offbeat Magazine*, March 1, 1993,
Another explanation for the surging crowds is that the Iguanas played late, and people came to the show after they had been elsewhere. The Continental Drifters, which contained members of the Bangles and r.e.m., played for a while every Sunday night around the corner at a club called Carrollton Station on Willow Street. When their shows were over, much of the crowd would walk the two blocks to the Maple Leaf. The Iguanas’ Sunday night shows also became popular among service industry professionals.

And then also what happened with the Leaf, because we would play late, you would get these late waves, like even after they cut the door off. You’re deep into the second set and the room is packed, it’s late, you close the door, and then you have all these service industry people who start showing up as their bars closed at 2. Now they’re showing up at 2:30, 3 o’clock and want you to play to 5. And you’ve been playing since 10:30, and now it’s like 3 o’clock, and they don’t want you to stop.

– René Coman

According to Coman, one of the best things about the Maple Leaf gig was that, as a musician, “you hardly ever have any other conflicting gigs on Sunday night... you weren’t going to have to give up any other gigs for that and you could still work Friday and Saturday... So [it was] a way to work three or four times a week.” Also, since they don’t typically work on Sundays, it was not uncommon for musicians to be in the audience for the Iguanas’ Maple Leaf gigs. This led to musical friendships, opportunities, and at least one unforgettable collaboration.

Certainly a lot of touring bands would wind up at that Sunday night gig, guys that had played Saturday night and they have Sunday night off and they want to hang out in New Orleans because why not? Why go somewhere else that’s not going to be as good as New Orleans for your day off? So you’d see bands like the Fleshtones... or Cracker... We got to be friends with [Cracker] because of them coming to the Leaf...

I remember one time I wound up making a record because this guy was doing songwriting in New Orleans and came to the Leaf and talked to me on the break.

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He’s like, “Yeah, I’m a bass player, but I’m playing guitar on my record. You play great, I want you to be on my record.”

- René Coman

The Iguanas got their first big break in the music business at one of their Sunday night gigs. The story goes that Jimmy Buffett was starting his own record label and asked Jazz and Heritage Festival executive producer Quint Davis to recommend a New Orleans band that he might want to sign. Davis’s answer was to take Buffett to the Maple Leaf on a Sunday. By the end of the night, the Iguanas had a record deal and the opening slot on Jimmy Buffett’s tour that was three months away. But it was February 1992 when the Iguanas had one of the musical thrills of their lifetimes on a night that would be permanently etched into the legend and lore of the Maple Leaf.

Well, one night we showed up and Bruce Springsteen and Patty Scialfa were sitting at the bar and it wasn’t really even crowded yet. They were there when we got there and we were setting up and we’re looking at each other like, “That’s Bruce Springsteen over there.” “Yeah, it sure is.” There’s a New Orleans character that we don’t approach people…. [It’s] not seen as cool… You tend to leave people alone, but at some point one of our guys was getting a drink and Bruce was right there and they just started chatting. It might have been Joe or something and he was like, “Hey, man, if you want to come sit in and play a tune or something,” and I think Bruce might have said, “Yeah, yeah, I’ll see.”

So, we took a break and actually they were dancing during the first set and stuff and he’s like, “Wow, I love you guys’ band, man, it’s really cool.” And he was like, “Yeah, I’ll play a tune with you guys.” And he got up and did like three songs with us. It’s really interesting, when you are on stage with somebody that has that kind of forward momentum, just even in a small club, just the kind of push that… Forward momentum is the best way to describe it where it’s just a lot of energy that they’re able to generate.

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351 Tisserand, “Iguanas Of The Night.”
352 Keith Spera, ”The Big Boss Was A Perfect Fit On The Maple Leaf’s Small Stage,” Times-Picayune, March 17, 2000, Lagniappe.
I’ve seen other people like that that can just get up by themselves, play acoustic guitar, and it just really feels like a lot coming off the stage, like, "Wow." And Bruce is like that. Being on the bandstand with him, you feel like, "Now, we’re flying an F-18 or something."

- René Coman

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Ch. 8- HANK’S STAMP

At the dawn of the 1990’s, Hank Staples began to think seriously about his life and his future. He lost both of his parents in quick succession, first his father then his mother the following year. He could see 40 on the horizon, and was realizing that he really did not want to tend bar for the rest of his life. Carl Brown had offered to sell Hank his shares in the Maple Leaf before, which had stimulated Hank’s interest in ownership of the bar. But Carl was not really being serious; he just liked taking Hank to lunch so he could have a captive audience listen to him talk/rant. Something Jim Stratton had said to him on one of his trips down kept rolling around Hank’s head. Over Jazzfest the previous year, Stratton looked at Hank and said, “This place needs something. It needs new blood or something. Otherwise it’s just going to whither on the vine.” Stratton told Hank to contact him when he was ready to buy and he would sell his shares to him.

Stratton did not relish the idea of selling his stake in the Maple Leaf. “I had a kid going to college. I had no money,” he explains. His son Jeff had been a luger through high school, and planned on attending a private college in upstate New York to be near the training facility for the U.S. Men’s Luge team. “I had to get rid of

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something to do it, and it was the Maple Leaf. It’d been 20 years or so. It was very upsetting to me, but it had to be. It just had to be.”

Once Hank got everything sorted out about his parents’ estate, he called up Stratton and told him he was ready to buy his shares, both in the bar and the building (“The key to the Maple Leaf is this building,” says Hank). Once they had worked out an arrangement, Hank called Carl Brown to tell him the news. Carl was not happy. For one thing, Carl had wanted Hank to buy out Bill Odom. Carl and Odom did not get along. More importantly, Carl was not happy that Hank and Stratton had negotiated a deal without him. Carl was an attorney; he liked to have control. And the idea of relinquishing any control to someone who had formerly been an employee in an arrangement made without his input was distinctly unappealing.

Carl was very angry, and he said I went behind his back. But I said Carl, after seven years, I have to do something with my life. I'm not tending bar (forever). He had... a tantrum is the only way to put it. He basically said [that] seven and a half percent of the building is valueless but he wants it and he will put a stop to me buying in, and all this stuff.

I was like, I have to pick my battles and it was not that important, so I didn't buy that seven and a half percent of the building. Carl bought Stratton’s share of the building and I bought Stratton’s 25%. That was the plan, but then Bill Odom heard about this and immediately he thought the only reason Stratton was selling is because it’s gonna go out of business. So he was like, "Hey- wanna buy my share of the Maple Leaf?" When Odom said he wants to sell, I call Brown up immediately and I say, "Odom wants to sell." I said, "I don't know if I can swing both shares, but Odom is the guy we need to get rid of." Carl was all on board with that. Real quickly, we set up the sale and I bought their shares.”

- Hank Staples

On April Fool’s Day of 1992, Hank Staples officially became one of the owners of the Maple Leaf Bar. Carl structured the deal so that the shares were actually sold

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355 Jim Stratton, telephone interview by author, April 2017.
357 Hank Staples, interview by author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
to himself, Hank, and John Parsons, and split between the three of them. Carl did not want Hank- or anybody but himself, for that matter- to own fifty percent or more.

The Maple leaf Bar, 8316 Oak St., has been called the "granddaddy of Uptown music clubs," and continuously offers some of the best in south Louisiana music, from ragtime, rock and rhythm and blues to Cajun, zydeco and New Orleans funk. The Maple Leaf’s regular clientele is both extremely literate and extremely informal. Dancing with your shoes off is definitely permissible here.

- Times-Picayune Jazzfest After-Hours Guide 1992

Hank’s timing was fortuitous for the Maple Leaf. Stratton had been right; the bar was in danger of withering on the vine. The world was changing, and the public’s tastes were changing with it. The Maple Leaf was not, and it was beginning to fall behind. Rockin’ Dopsie passed away in the summer of 1993. His son, Rockin’ Dopsie, Jr., took over the Zydeco Twisters and carried on. The young bandleader eventually found success on his own terms, but he couldn’t manage to follow what his father had done at the Maple Leaf. The bar and Dopsie, Jr. decided to part ways and move on. Around this time the Maple Leaf also lost their signature Cajun night to another bar.

What the dance floor was when the Maple Leaf first opened, that side of the building (the band room) had a linoleum floor. And I’ve seen pictures from the mid-70’s and there was a tiny little spot on the floor where the linoleum had been worn down. Well over the years I watched that thing grow like the bald spot on a man’s head. And what happened was, when the linoleum surface was worn off, underneath was, along with [concrete and] a lot of dirt, was the glue or adhesive that had been used to put the linoleum down. And it wasn’t sticky or anything but your feet could glide on the linoleum and they could not on that adhesive that was underneath. And what happened was, over time, it got to be where the linoleum was only around the very edge of the room and otherwise it was that... adhesive.

- Hank Staples

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A combination music club/bowling alley called the Mid-City Rock n’ Bowl had opened in 1989 a mile down Carrollton Avenue. It had good lighting, decent bathrooms, air conditioning, and a big, wide hardwood dance floor. Within a couple of years, they were booking Cajun and zydeco acts regularly. The siren song of decent amenities was enough to lure the dancers away from the Maple Leaf permanently. And it had been the dancers- not the bands- that made Cajun night what it was. They would install a hardwood dance floor at the Maple Leaf in the early 90’s in an attempt to woo the dancing crowd back. Carl even sprang for a good one! The floor is made of Brazilian black maple wood, or maybe Brazilian black cherry. Carl even had the silhouette of a maple leaf inlaid in white maple in the middle of the dance floor in front of the stage. But the dancers never returned.

Losing Cajun and Zydeco almost simultaneously was difficult for the Maple Leaf, not only from a financial perspective- although that was a dire concern- but also because so much of the bar’s identity was tied up with those two types of music. But by the dawn of the nineties, several places around New Orleans offered Cajun and Zydeco music; a 1991 *Times-Picayune* feature lists sixteen options in the city for Cajun dancers.360 No longer the only game in town, the Maple Leaf was forced to move on.

Employee issues also needed to be addressed. Barrooms have time limits for most people, and bad things happen if people go past their limit. In front of the bar, the biggest danger is alcoholism. Behind the bar it is burnout, often accompanied by alcoholism. It did not help that John Parsons and Carl Brown both had strong

aversions to firing anybody. There has never been a lot of turnover at the Maple Leaf. In the service industry, this can be good and this can be bad.

It’s a problem in the industry. And the problem here is that people would stay for years when they should’ve moved on. We’ve had that problem. It was worse when I first came in. It was terrible when I worked here because, pretty much the whole bar staff, if you really were a tough boss, would have to go. And when I first was working here I wasn’t running it, but I could see pretty much most of the staff should’ve been moved on to something else. They were too comfortable in their jobs and they were utterly burned out and so... They weren’t being friendly, nice hosts. They were way more, "Here’s your drink. I want to talk to my friend."

- Hank Staples

They’d been there forever. When we first went to the bar], you used to walk in the Maple Leaf back then, like late ’80s, early ’90s, and it was just like, oh man, the bartenders were like, 60 years old.

- Chris Jones

Hank fired some people. He ran some others off. Learning how to find good employees himself took trial and error. A string of younger people he hired- mostly Tulane students- did not work out. “Everyone wants to work nights, and when they work a night they realize I’m not in the big league,” he explains. But he had successes. Chris Jones and Marcus Lyons were both part of this “bartender changing of the guard,” as it has been called. Both had been regulars in the barroom and on the dance floor for a few years. Lyons was actually the first black employee at the Maple Leaf. None of the subjects interviewed ever mentioned any sort of racial difficulty or tension as being part of the atmosphere in the Maple Leaf. A couple of African-American men interviewed pointedly noted its absence. But the attitudes of some of the original owners were not always in sync with those of the denizens of the barroom. “Marcus... Carl Brown never would’ve hired him because he was

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black,” sighs Hank. “When we hired Marcus, when Carl was here we just got Marcus to hang out for a while and then when Carl left, Marcus would go to work.”

Hank brought a practicality to the management of the Maple Leaf that had been lacking. For the original owners, opening the bar had been a lark. Hank viewed it as his future. Hank took over much of the management of the barroom while Parsons continued to handle the music. But even as he began to put his own stamp on the Maple Leaf, Hank held firm to its traditions and spirit.

The day I got hired- my buddy Bill Petrie was working- Hank says, "Hey Jonesy, I need you to come by the bar." This is after I'd been fired from working the door. 'Cause like the Iguanas were like, "Oh the money's not right," and I'm like, "Whatever." You know, I never stole. I'm sure I lost money, but I never stole money. Because everybody got high then, you know, esoterically speaking.

And Hank, he ... After I'd been fired he pulled me in again and he said, "Uh, I need you to come by the bar around 8:45." I said, "Okay, cool." I don't know what's going on, so I come in and I see him, and he goes, "Just get a drink and I'll talk to you in a minute." So I look at my buddy Bill and I'm like, "Hey Bill, what's up?" And he's like, "Hey man." He gets me a drink, back then it's like Seagram's and 7, whatever.

And he gets me a drink, and we're talking, and I see Hank come around the bar and he whispers something in Bill's ear. And Bill comes walking around the bar, and Hank goes, "Jonesy, you're up!" He didn't ask me if I wanted to be a bartender. I said, "What?" He goes, "You're the bartender now." I got up from my bar stool as Bill walked this way. I got behind the bar as Bill sat in the seat that I had been in. And I was behind the bar and I gave him a Seagram's and 7. And he goes, "Don't worry about it Chris..."

...That's Maple Leaf management.

- Chris Jones

Hank also had other intentions for hiring Chris Jones, or “Jonesy” as Hank likes to call him. Tastes were changing, and new styles of music were becoming more popular with the show-going public. The early 90’s saw the rise of jamband culture, with acts like Phish and Widespread Panic taking up the Grateful Dead's torch of putting their focus on live performance over selling records. These new
bands were beginning to develop followings of their own. Both Phish and Widespread Panic had made their first public performances in New Orleans at Tipitina’s. In New Orleans itself, funk was becoming more and more popular with younger crowds. Hank realized that he needed to tap into this growing audience. Jones was involved in the local music industry; he was managing a funk band. At the time, the Iguanas’ Sunday night shows were remarkably popular and profitable for the bar. Rebirth Brass Band was also just beginning their extended stay on the Oak Street stage, but it would take a while longer for Tuesday nights to really take off, as it would for Walter “Wolfman” Washington’s regular Saturday night slot, which began in 1992. Otherwise, much of the regular lineup was aging, as was their audience. Hank wanted Jones to help booking different acts. John Parsons was understandably not thrilled with the prospect.

[Our] lineup was really stale... Our business was hurting. And Chris did have really good ideas on bands to book. So I was having these meetings with John and Chris, and I was trying to at least have Chris have input into and try to liven it up. And John was resistant to that. I understand why. He felt his turf was being stepped on- and of course it was- but we had a serious problem with... Actually, if things continued as they had been, we would’ve gone out of business. So something had to be done to liven up the bookings, get more variety, that kind of thing.

- Hank Staples

I was the guy that eased the Maple Leaf from the Cajun and zydeco that John Parsons was- [he was] a stalwart booker of the Louisiana music for years. I was used as a... [in the] management style at the time, maybe possibly as a bit of a wedge, because I was involved, I was managing a funk band and things were good. And Hank was always really hip to... Hank’s been really good for the Leaf. He was always looking ahead and seeing what the trends were, whereas John was entrenched in the culturally rich Louisiana heritage. But Hank’s where things were moving. So I was running into trying to ease things into the new paradigm, [which is] part of why my new name from John Parsons [was] New Funk City. So there’s that.

- Chris Jones

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By 1995, John Parsons felt that he had reached his limit as well. He sold his shares in the Maple Leaf to Hank and Carl Brown. He retired from the barroom and went back to the chess table. He would become a noted youth chess coach in New Orleans, and eventually would see three of his pupils win national championships. For his part, Hank seems to have forgotten any friction that may have arisen from the changes he was trying to implement. Today when asked by interviewers about the Maple Leaf’s history, he rarely misses a chance to sing Parsons’s praises and highlight his accomplishments.

With Parsons gone, Hank took over day-to-day operations at the Maple Leaf. Business-wise, things were not well. There were bright spots and reasons for hope, such as Walter “Wolfman” Washington’s regular Saturday night shows, which had begun in 1992, and a general decline in on-the-clock drinking by employees. But the Maple Leaf’s fortunes were on the downslope, and it would take time before they were pointed back skyward.

It was the second or third year I bought in, business absolutely died. It was a couple of things. One was Frenchman Street became what it... you could see it going to be what it is now. Today, a lot of Frenchman Street doesn’t charge cover, but back then they were booking the same music we were and charging cover, and we were losing a lot of business. Then the other thing was there were a whole lot of people who now were quite a bit younger than me who were nightclub regulars and their taste had changed. A lot of the stuff that had worked at the Maple Leaf back in the day... it wasn’t like that anymore.

It was mid-90s. We had a spell where it literally looked like we... At one point I called Carl up and I said, “Well, I guess it’s over, Carl.” And he said, “What do you mean?” And I said “I don’t have enough money to buy beer this week. We’re busted.”

One of the big problems at that time period was the music. We had our Sunday band, The Iguanas, they had left. We had nothing replacing that. We used to get 400 people or more on Sundays. Tuesday Rebirth was not what they are today. It was good Tuesday, but Thursday the Cajun music was done. We were trying to keep it going but it was losing money. Friday with Rockin’ Dopsie... Rockin’ Dopsie, Sr. had died and the new band [with Dopsie, Jr.] didn’t have the same popularity. ...We just had a very set scale line up, and all of a sudden we were losing money and it looked like we might go under.
Another one of the things at the time- ...when we first opened, most bands would have their own sound system. And they would haul it around and they’d do their setup, they’d set their own levels and all that stuff. But at some point when it became extremely competitive in music- it was when I at first started booking the music- we started booking more touring acts. Too many other people were doing local stuff, and we had to do something. We were definitely in trouble. And of course this is when the jam band thing first started and had become big. But with the touring acts, if you didn’t have a house system, you lost so much... So many bands wouldn’t consider you, which I understand. So we got the system.

And the first system we got was off a... It was mostly JBL equipment. And JBL had contacted us not having anything to do with... They didn’t even know we were trying to put a sound system in. They contacted us and they wanted to do a commercial. They were filming commercials in three cities in the country and these were going national exposure. I saw the one filmed here. It was on for about two years. And the other cities were Los Angeles and New York, so we were in good company. And what they did here was they filmed Walter "Wolfman" Washington on stage in grainy black and white. And he was singing one of the songs on the Blue Moon Rising album, a CD of his. And all it did was it showed... It really, really looked like the Maple Leaf looks at its best. And by that, I mean just a cool place with kick-ass music.

And on the commercial, it was Walter singing for 10 or 15 seconds and then as Walter fades out, it says... "When Walter ‘Wolfman’ Washington gets hot at the Maple Leaf Bar in New Orleans, he’s using JBL’s... And so we... JBL, I cannot remember what they paid us, but we used it to buy most of the sound system. We threw in another maybe ten grand.

We had a couple years where things were very challenging but then we settled in and we had a series of years where every year Jazz Fest was at least 20% better than the year before.

- Hank Staples

Installing a sound system and opening up the booking weren’t Hank’s only innovations for the music side of the Maple Leaf’s business. Hank saw larger and larger numbers of out-of-towners turning up at the Maple Leaf during big events such as Jazzfest and Mardi Gras. He also saw more people sticking around until the end of the show, no matter how late into the night it went. During Jazzfest 1998, Hank teamed up with independent promoter Henry Petras to try something new. He scheduled a show featuring original Meters drummer Zigaboo Modeliste to begin at 4:20 a.m. According to longtime New Orleans live music aficionado Jay Mazza, this

move “set the bar higher than any other club in town and established a new paradigm during Jazz Fest.”⁶⁶⁸ More important than breaking new ground, the show sold out. By the turn of the millennium, so-called “sunrise shows” would be de rigueur for many of the clubs in town during Jazzfest, Mardi Gras, and Halloween.

Hank didn’t limit his improvements to the Maple Leaf’s musical offerings. He also tinkered with the operations of the barroom in an attempt to increase his servers’ efficiency. In the late 90’s, he got rid of glass glasses. The Maple Leaf was a sentimental holdout and one of the last music clubs in New Orleans to make the switch. Explaining his decision, Hank recalled his own days as a bartender in the late 80’s.

At night certainly I saw the value in it... There were nights... Like, the Cajun night would be the worst because I was tending bar for Cajun nights and you’d run out of glass behind the bar. At some point, you’d have to go out and bus the glass, and the only time you could really do that is when they’re all dancing because otherwise people were trying to drink. So you go out there and you gotta maneuver around all these people, who were pretty good dancers, but they’re moving very fast. Then you get all this glass and you get it on the bar and then you have to wash it... You have to wash it by hand.

- Hank Staples⁶⁶⁹

As the improvements began to show results in the bar’s bottom line, Hank wanted to use the extra money to improve some of the Maple Leaf long-neglected amenities. But there was an obstacle: his partner, Carl Brown. Carl’s aversion to spending money on improving the Maple Leaf bordered on religious fanaticism. Former employee and longtime regular Tim Allspach recalled improvements being made in a “series of steps.” The first of these steps, he laughed, was for Hank to

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⁶⁶⁸ Mazza, *Up Front and Center*, 294.
develop “the patience of Job” to deal with “the headbutting and resistance to improvement”\textsuperscript{370} from his partner.

[Carl] controlled the building and he handled all the renovations and stuff after the first year it was open. And he just had this thing... We used to have fights about it years later when I had bought in, because life is so much easier if you do it to building code. You don't worry. But he just would have this thing... He would look at something and decide, well, it'll be easiest to do it like this. And then we do it like that and we'd have problems years later.

\textit{- Hank Staples}\textsuperscript{371}

Eventually Hank was able to upgrade the electrical wiring and add air conditioning.

“The electricity was terrifying,” he explained to \textit{Times-Picayune} writer Keith Spera in 2004. “We only had 120 amps coming in the place. We now have 800 amps and it's all up to code, so the electricity, knock on wood, is not going to destroy us.”\textsuperscript{372} He also knew that he had to address something else. The magnitude of funk- not the good kind- in the bathrooms was by that time already the stuff of legend. The women’s room in particular was an abomination. Hank had tried to get Carl’s consent to improve things since he first became a full-time employee. Eventually, he turned to psychology.

\textit{...[The] women’s room, we got so many complaints when I first bought in, well before I bought in, when I was working here. And so I used to tell Carl, and he used to just get pissed off at me, and at one point he said, “If you mention the women's room again, I will fire you and you can find somewhere else to live.” So what I used to do when every woman had a complaint, I’d say, “Could you do me a favor? Could you write this on a note to Carl and I’ll put in his safe.” And he started getting all these notes. And I'll never forget one day we're eating and he turns to me and he says, "We have to do something about the women’s room." And I'm like, "You son of a bitch..."}

\textit{- Hank Staples}\textsuperscript{373}

\textsuperscript{370} Tim Allspach, interview by author, New Orleans, Louisiana, May 2017.
\textsuperscript{371} Hank Staples, interview by author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
\textsuperscript{372} Spera, “Long Life The Leaf.”
\textsuperscript{373} Hank Staples, interview by author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
Hank is realistic about the improvements he’s been able to make. “It’s not the bathrooms are anything great,” he explained to Spera, “but they’re acceptable. At one point, it was an act of courage for a woman to use the bathroom at the Maple Leaf.”

Things were changing for the better on Oak Street as well. In the next few years, two new faces would hang out their shingles on the 8300 block of Oak Street. Chef Jacques Leonardi and artist Randy “Frenchy” Frechette both have a lot in common with Hank Staples. None of them were born or raised in New Orleans. In fact, they’re all from the Northeast; Jack is from upstate New York, Frenchy from Boston, and Hank hails from Washington, D.C. Each has their own particular vision for their life and work. Each is an icon in their chosen field. They all have large personalities.

Leonardi found New Orleans when he was stationed in the city after graduating from the Coast Guard Academy. He fell in love with New Orleans: its culture, its music, and especially its food. He somehow convinced famed Chef Paul Prudhomme to let him work in the kitchen at K-Paul’s in the French Quarter (in secret, as he was still commissioned in the Coast Guard). After his discharge from the Coast Guard, Leonardi worked in a number of different kitchens around town. He and a Coast Guard buddy opened The Warehouse Café in the early nineties, a bar and nightclub in the Warehouse district. In 1996, Leonardi decided he wanted to open his own spot. After hunting around town for the right location, he thought he found just the place on the 8300 block of Oak Street. The building was two doors

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374 Spera, “Long Life The Leaf.”
down from the Maple Leaf. But there was a problem. Hank Staples owned that
building; he bought it when its previous occupant, the Café Savannah, went out of
business. And Hank was not at all interested in having Leonardi for a neighbor.

Well first off, I'll have to say when the Cafe Savannah went up for sale I was in much
better financial shape and I bought it to control the business that went in there. The
mistake I made was thinking at the last minute "Oh, I can run the restaurant." [It
went belly-up and] I still don’t have a credit card to this day. What I wanted in that
location [was] a business that was complementary to the Maple Leaf, that would
help the Maple Leaf, and also be good for the street. I went through two restaurant
tenets that were dreadful. It was mostly because the people involved were crazy.

I really didn't want to rent to Jacques. I had only known him as a competitor when
he used to have a music club where he would copy what I did. It was... The
Warehouse, (note: it was Warehouse Café) He was basically carbon copying what
we booked here. It was like... I didn't know him as a restaurant guy, so I felt he was
just gonna put a bar in there and probably try to sell discount liquor. You know,
undercut us on price and so what would happen is a big crowd would come here
and everyone would go running over there to get their drink and come back and all
that.

I wouldn't even return his call and a couple of times he came buy the place and I was
here and I knew who it was. I wouldn't say a word. Everybody knows: if someone's
looking for me and I don’t say anything, you better not tell them who I am. He comes
by one time and he leaves a plate of food. I’m not here when he does that but then
it's later on and it’s already been sitting out for several hours. The note said
something to the effect of "Please try this, it’s the kind of food we’ll do next door,
and it’s really good. I hope you like it."

Well, I put it in my office and I’m just in my office and I don’t eat it. I look at it and it
looks kinda nasty so I think "Eh." You know what I mean? That night, I get really,
really fucked up. I get really loaded. The next day I don’t get up till about 9 o’clock,
which is really late for me, and I feel so bad. I have a horrible, horrible hangover.
What happens is- I need something to eat, and so I try a little bit of [Jacque’s food].
The first thing was the rabbit tenderloin. My God, it was good, and I start eating the
other stuff. I can’t even remember exactly what it was. It was all really good.

[The food is] cold... It’s also about a day old. But it was so delicious! I’m literally on
the telephone going <mimics talking with a mouth full of food> “Hey Jack? Yeah, this
is Hank ...”

Leonardi called his restaurant Jacques-Imo’s, a play on his own name and the
word “Jockamo,” which is a fragment of a Mardi Gras Indian chant and also part of a
line from an old popular local R&B song, “Iko Iko.” He decorated the interior in

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bright colors and scores of garage sale framed pictures, and hung sign out front reading, “Warm Beer, Lousy Food, Poor Service.” His food was a blend of traditional Cajun and Creole soul styles of cooking, served in sizeable portions for reasonable prices. He also didn’t take reservations for parties smaller than six. So as the word about his restaurant began to spread, it came with the caveat to “go early or be prepared to wait.” Jacques-Imo’s has a small bar, and quickly diners-in-queue began finding their way into the Maple Leaf. After a while, regulars began to refer to the Maple Leaf as “Jacques-Imo’s waiting room” from about 5-8 p.m. every weeknight. The hostesses from Jacques-Imo’s will even come to the bar to tell patrons when their table is ready. Hank says flatly that 90% of his daytime business is people waiting for a table at Jacques-Imo’s. Twenty years on, Jacques-Imo’s retains its popularity and “cool, funky” reputation and regularly makes both local and national “best of” lists.

Artist Randy “Frenchy” Frechette arrived in New Orleans in 1997 to pursue his dream of becoming a live event painter. In particular, his interest was in painting musicians as they perform. Today, live painters are a common sight at many events. In 1997, the idea was novel, to say the least. Frenchy’s friends brought him to the Maple Leaf for Rebirth on his first Tuesday in New Orleans. He started talking to some people at the bar and was eventually introduced to Hank. Frenchy explained what he did, and asked if he could come paint a show. Hank thought he just wanted to get in for free, but he eventually acquiesced and told the young painter to come back Thursday night for bluesman Chris Thomas King. “I did and the rest is history,”
says Frenchy.\textsuperscript{376} While he would paint music all over the city (and soon, the country), the Maple Leaf would become Frenchy's home base, where he would be if he wasn’t anywhere else. His paintings would soon adorn the walls of the Maple Leaf and Jacques-Imo’s, along with several other places around the city. In 2003, he closed his French Quarter gallery and headed Uptown, hanging out his shingle at 8311 Oak Street, across the street from the Maple Leaf. Soon, Frenchy was returning Hank's hospitality by providing the used of his gallery as a green room for musicians performing at the Maple Leaf.

The trio of the Maple Leaf, Jacques-Imo’s, and Frenchy’s Gallery would transform Oak Street into a bohemian outpost in far uptown. Foodies and art-centric music lovers began venturing up to Oak Street to taste, see, and listen to what they’d been hearing about. The symbiotic relationship between all the businesses only added to the cachet.

And it's hip and it's made it a destination, you know. And certainly when Jacques went in next door and what Jacques-Imo’s has been able to do... I say to people from out of town that have never been here before, "You want to go have a killer New Orleans experience, go get dinner at Jacques's, go to the Leaf. Just get dinner early. 'Cause you're gonna be too catatonic to go drinking."

In the same regards of Jacques-Imo’s coming in and adding the restaurant element, the hip restaurant element to the Leaf being the hip venue, Frenchy adds the art element. If you want to go, this is a New Orleans experience. And Frenchy, he's certainly part of that. Especially how high profile he's gotten... So when people come to New Orleans, especially people that are into art, they're coming to see... They know Frenchy. He's on the map. And that adds to the whole, the whole kind of mystery or the legend of it. You can go to Oak Street and you might see Frenchy. You'll probably see Frenchy.

- Dave Jordan\textsuperscript{377}

\textsuperscript{376} Randall “Frenchy” Frechette, interview by author, New Orleans, Louisiana, May 2017.
\textsuperscript{377} Dave Jordan, interview by author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
Ch. 9- "WE ARE STILL HERE!"

As Mid-Summer Mardi Gras 2005 approached, members of the Krewe of OAK were keeping an eye on the weather as they decorated the Maple Leaf and put the finishing touches on their costumers. There was a hurricane in the Gulf named Katrina, and she was a big one. Initial forecasting models showed the storm headed for the Florida Panhandle, but by Friday afternoon, August 26, models showed Katrina headed straight for New Orleans. The happy hour crowd at the Maple Leaf that afternoon was nonplussed, cursing at the television and declaring that they weren’t going anywhere.378

By Saturday morning, the enormity and intensity of the impending storm had tempered some of the bravado on Oak Street, but preparations for the evening’s festivities proceeded according to plan. At five o’clock that afternoon, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin called for a voluntary evacuation of the city. Upon learning this, Krewe member Jay Sayatovic decided to call the bar to see if the parade was still happening. “Sure is, man. Be there or be square!” was the response he got.379

Many of the revelers who gathered outside the Maple Leaf that evening in the 90-degree heat of Oak Street- in full costume- had packed their cars before they came to the parade. Some were planning to leave immediately after the parade,

others the next morning. One marcher wore a sign safety-pinned to the back of his shirt with “Should I Stay or Should I GO?” written in crayon. There was resignation in the air to the impending calamity, but it was matched by a gallows enthusiasm to go out with a bang.

Many simply saw no reason to miss a good party. Maple Leaf neighbor and house artist Randy “Frenchy” Frechette was that year’s King of OAK. An all-star band led by George Porter, Jr. was booked to play the Krewe ball later that night. The Rebirth Brass Band was there to lead the parade, accompanied by nineteen-year-old rising star Troy “Trombone Shorty” Andrews.

A small film crew was there shooting a documentary about the talented but brash young event painter. Filmmakers Andrew Scott and George Hamilton had been trying for some time to convince Frenchy to let them tell his story. He had finally relented and invited the pair to the Mid-Summer Mardi Gras parade celebrating his reign as King of OAK. The resulting documentary, King of Oak Street, chronicles not only the parade, but also the storm and its aftermath. It follows Frenchy through his travels and his struggles as he attempts to piece his life back together amid the pervasive chaos and tragedy of the first months after the storm. Narrated by jazz poet and radical hippy activist John Sinclair, The King of Oak Street was shown at numerous film festivals and garnered both a jury and an audience award at The Big Easy Film Festival in 2009.

It's awesome man... So like, we have everybody, you know? 75% of this [hurricane] is in the Gulf of Mexico, we don't know where it’s gonna go. Meanwhile, we got a parade that we happen to have, that we're throwing that weekend. So [Frenchy's] gonna be king, we had Trombone Shorty and Rebirth Brass Band walking that night.
right? So all of a sudden, old Sugar Ray (Nagin) is like, I don't know man, who knows? It coulda hit from Texas to Florida, so, [who] had it right, I mean, who knows? But nevertheless, we were in a situation where all of a sudden there's a mandatory... not mandatory evacuation, but it was, evacuate everybody...

So we had two thousand people that stayed, with a police escort, Trombone Shorty and Rebirth. We're going to do this fucking thing, right?

– Leroy Mitchell

According to legend and Hank, every participant in the parade who wanted to evacuate got out safely.

That's right. [People] drove away in costume. Also we had heard - I tell this, I've told it for 10 years now - we heard that everyone who wanted to evacuate did. There were two kids who were arrested for selling nitrous outside. They were sprung early. The cops just let them go because they knew. We say everyone who participated was able to evacuate if they wanted to, even the two hippies selling nitrous.

- Hank Staples

For a variety of reasons, Hank Staples simply had not wanted to evacuate.

Louisiana's one of the few states in the country that can discount liquor sales to vendors. I had started to take advantage of buy-in purchasing. We had a lot of booze on hand. I knew if there was nobody here, the place would be torn apart. At my age- I was 50 when Katrina hit- I'm thinking literally I'll have to start from scratch. I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to do that at my age. Then the next thing was, it was Hurricane George was the first time the city was officially evacuated. Way before George I had been saying, "All right. You have half a million people leaving. If you're going north, there's a 2-lane road that crosses the lake. What if somebody has a flat tire?" That's what happened almost [during the evacuation for George], except it wasn't a flat tire. Their engine block caught on fire. It's even weirder. That car included one of the Maple Leaf bartenders.

It was one of these things where... the Maple Leaf survived Betsy. The building- it's a very strong building. It was, like, I'd rather get enough food and water on hand and just ride it out. I knew we were so close to the levy. It was like, if it floods up here to my second floor, it's over. That's why I stayed. We were well prepared. We had a lot of food. We never ran out of... The city water supply was shut off but we never ran out of water. We had stockpiled enough bottled water. We were cooking every night for people.

– Hank Staples

In some ways, Hank was an outlier. Post-storm studies of who stayed and who evacuated noted that race and educational achievement were determining

factors that reflected “constraints on respondents’ mobility rather than their choice to ‘ride out’ the storm.” However, researchers also noted that strong ties to the local community could also play a significant role. “In addition, the low rates of evacuation among those with high levels of local ties- regardless of their ties outside their home county or parish- suggest that local social relations had a binding effect, diminishing respondents’ propensity or ability to evacuate prior to the storm.”

Other researchers noted that people who remained in the city were looked upon by outside observers as “passive and lacking agency” (as opposed to people who evacuated, who were seen as “agency, independent, and in control”). This viewpoint was grounded what they termed “the disjoint model of agency- the most prevalent model I mainstream middle-class White contexts. The disjoint model assumes that agency emanates from within the individual and defines ‘good’ actions as those that influence the environment according to individual motives, goals, and preferences.” However, these same researchers found that not to be the case. “[In] stark contrast to observers’ perceptions, stayers’ narratives emphasized interdependence with others... and strength, suggesting that stayers had a different way of acting in than world than leavers did... [Stayers] more often than leavers emphasized the importance of connection to and caring for others.”

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The century-old structure at 8316 Oak Street lost a portion of its roof and a
developed a large hole in the attic that let the rainwaters in as Katrina passed
overhead, but otherwise remained standing and intact. Northeast areas of the
Carrolton neighborhood experienced some flooding, but Pontchartrain's waters
never made it to the Riverbend area. The Sliver By The River stayed dry, relatively
speaking. In the days and weeks after the storm, the Maple Leaf served as sort of a
neighborhood community center. Those who had remained gravitated to the bar. A
few brave early returners soon joined them. For months, the Maple Leaf was an
outpost of civilization among abandoned ruins. It was a foothold of life in a largely
lifeless place. The bar had no power or water, but it did have people. Basic human
companionship was for a while as hard to come by in New Orleans as helpful
government assistance. The Maple Leaf also had food. Hank grilled in front of the
bar every day, serving food to anyone who asked for a plate. And they had booze.

There were a lot of neighborhood people [around]. I was the only one actually
staying on premise. People would come here, especially in the evening, they’d come
here to eat because we had food and it was hot. We were cooking it every day. Then
I was just giving away booze. Notions of business were out the window until mid-
September. Then things got more normalized. Then I said, “All right, now we gotta
start charging.” So we did.

[The power] was out until almost November. This was what's weird. The 8300 block
of Oak Street was the last block of Oak Street to get power, and we were the only
business that was open. The 84, 85, 86- all of that had power. Nobody’s there.
Nobody. It's completely empty. The 81 and 8200 blocks, at one point a couple of
those people had returned... But we're the only place that's really open, really doing
things, and we have no power.

— Hank Staples

Some displaced residents began making plans to return as soon as the initial
shock had worn off. Newly hired Maple Leaf bartender Karina Nathan was one of
them. Her reasons for returning were both emotional and practical.

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We came back pretty fast. We were so heartbroken and we wanted to know our stuff was okay. [Also-] people were making so much money at the Maple Leaf and I was a bartender and I was like, "If I don't get back there, I'm not going to have a job and I love this job." People are making $900 bucks a night from all these construction workers that have so much cash and so much FEMA money and no one's there to provide products and services.

So, yeah. I went back and I got my job back.

– Karina Nathan

The moment Karina returned to the city, she had two things on her agenda: check on her stuff, and head to the Maple Leaf. This sequence would be repeated by scores of people in the following months. Check on house, head to the Leaf. Check on apartment, head to the Leaf. Check on stuff, head to the Leaf. Karina was not entirely ready for what she saw.

I remember the first day I came back; I really wanted to know all my stuff was okay. All my stuff was up there (at the Maple Leaf) at that point. I remember coming in and all the guys had beards all of a sudden and they were talking so loud, like they had gone feral. Like, the men had gone feral. They all had holsters with guns on. I’m very much like a peace hippie from Massachusetts. Just seeing guns is pretty intense for me. So having all these guys I know, all of a sudden with beards… And they were just so, so loud. It was like something had changed in them.

They were so excited to see me. It was like the battle was over but they still weren’t clear of it in their minds. Yeah. After that, it was like the community. It was like the New Orleans community center. You didn’t know who died. So just being able to come there and be like, "Oh, yay. You didn’t die?" Everyone had lost so much. So many people, let’s say 90% of people had lost everything. A lot of people, the man of the family came home but the rest of the family did not so there was sort of this Old West… They talk about how in the Old West a woman could sell a pie for $500 bucks, or whatever. It was kind of like that.

– Karina Nathan

The artist Frenchy returned in the first week of October.

I came straight here (to the Maple Leaf). It was crazy. There was no electricity, so there’s no sound. There’s no humming. All the… It’s crazy how much noise pollution’s out here. But yeah, just that, and it was just all service men and contractors. It was weird. It was really dark. We had… Vincent’s was the only restaurant. Because of their neon sign, they lit up that whole section of St. Charles.

We all had guns. Every one of us.

- Frenchy

Multiple observers have noted the pervasiveness of firearms. "[With] no help in sight, the relative calm that characterized the immediate aftermath of the storm gave way to anxiety-driven interpersonal aggression.... Fearful of looting and other aggression, some survivors began to brandish weapons."\(^{392}\)

No two Katrina stories are alike. Maple Leaf happy hour fixture Tommy Quinlan returned to his home around the corner from the bar on September 1. His house had power when he got back. When asked about conditions in the weeks after the storm, Tommy actually perks up and smiles.

> It was great. It was a lot of fun... It was the National Guard and the local police... They didn’t... They just let everything slide because when they came in everybody was, "Hi!" - just give them Red Bull and whatever they wanted, food. We had grills out in the street. We could just grill in the street.

— Tommy Quinlan\(^{393}\)

The weeks and months following the storm were strange and difficult all over the Gulf Coast. There was for a long time a nagging worry that normality might never return. In New Orleans, this was amplified exponentially. Encamped in a largely abandoned and mostly devastated city, deprived of the most basic utilities and services, and living under the sometimes heavy-handed thumbs of teenaged National Guardsmen and borrowed out-of-state (and out-of-depth) municipal police officers, New Orleanians experienced stresses not unlike those of people who live in war zones. People dealt with this stress in a variety of ways, some constructive, some destructive. At the Maple Leaf, they split the difference.

\(^{391}\) Randy Frechette, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 2017.
\(^{393}\) Tommy Quinlan, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 2017.
I don't know if they invented primal screaming then, but they got really... It really heightened at that point. There was a lot of, "Now, we do primal scream." Everyone would do it and we would primal scream together. He goes like, "Oh." Then, everyone does it like that. It's not super shrill or anything. It would just go on and on. I remember once, I was bartending and the guys started to do it and Hank was like, "Come on. Do it." I was like, "Okay. Okay." So it was mandatory primal scream and then, kind of a slogan for the moment became, "We are still here." They would just yell, "WE ARE STILL HERE! WE ARE STILL HERE!" It was so significant because it was like, if we're still here then where are we? We're in New Orleans so that means New Orleans is still here. You fucking cops and you fucking Army, get the fuck out of here because you are not helping. Let us be us. We will fix this! We are still here! That was super powerful.

– Karina Nathan

Hank knew that what New Orleanians needed most was a return to normality, or at least a return to New Orleans's version of normality. “Hank from the Maple Leaf is a big proponent of getting things up and running and getting things moving,” John “Papa” Gros commented to an Offbeat reporter shortly after the storm. Hank understood that what New Orleanians wanted most in the world was to feel like New Orleanians again, even if just for a little while. They needed live music. Many musicians felt the same way.

But musicians care about New Orleans. One expression of this attachment is their return to the city as an embodiment of their musical practice. They might not stay, be adequately compensated, or perform with their regular band but many made a point of returning from wherever they had evacuated to perform at venues re-opening their doors. One musician evoked “loyalty to the city” by linking the resumption of one’s musical practice to a sense of moral duty toward New Orleans.

- Popular Music and Society, 2010

There is some conjecture as to just what was the first live music in New Orleans after Katrina. Many swear it was Walter “Wolfman” Washington at the Maple Leaf. Others insist that it was Coco Robicheaux at the Apple Barrel. A

Blackfire Revelation performance at One Eyed Jacks is named frequently as well. But what is not up for debate is that the most well-known, well-attended “first live music performance after Katrina” happened at 8316 Oak Street. On Friday, September 30, Walter “Wolfman” Washington walked through the doors of the Maple Leaf Bar with his guitar and his amplifier.

We were in Ohio, by my sister-in-law's. And the Maple Leaf called and told us they were opening and wanted to bring the music back... I said, “Let's go.” I didn't realize at the time that I was the first one to come back. I just wanted to come home.

– Walter “Wolfman” Washington

They were billed as Walter “Wolfman” Washington and the MRE's (Music Ready To Enjoy). The band was comprised of whichever musicians Hank had been able track down. The only certainties are Walter and drummer Kevin O'Day. Maple Leaf regular and Carrollton resident Keith “Fish” Williams provided a generator and PA. Amusingly, the show had gotten national publicity the day before, when National Public Radio reporter Ina Jaffe was interviewing Hank outside the bar and recorded him telling passerby named Jim Brooks about the show. The accidental plug was broadcast nationally on NPR's All Things Considered on the afternoon of the show.

Mr. STAPLES: Well, tomorrow we're open. With or without power, we'll be open.
Mr. BROOKS: Solid, man! Who's playing?
(Soundbite of laughter)
Mr. STAPLES: Oh, Walter is flying in.
Mr. BROOKS: W.W.W. (Walter “Wolfman” Washington)?
Mr. STAPLES: Yeah, Wolfman. So it's Walter, not with his regular band. He'll have--well, Kevin...

We opened September 30th. We had no running water or electricity, but we had generators. We were able to have full power for the stage so the musicians could play. The bathrooms were romantically lit with candles.

- Hank Staples

On the Friday night of the show, the inside of the bar was “crowded, dark, and hot.” One attendee later commented that the show was “run on generators and sidearms.” The generators were used to power the amps and pa. They also powered the Christmas lights being used to light the stage, but these were ultimately unnecessary. When word had gotten out that there would be live music at the iconic venue, reporters (who had also spent weeks stuck in an abandoned city, although obviously under much different circumstances) showed up en masse with camera crews in tow. The camera lights were what really lit the stage that night. Anonymous blogger “Swampish,” who appears to have been part of the Times-Picayune online team, was at the Maple Leaf that night and recorded his thoughts in a blog.

…I turned toward the Maple Leaf and the first music show of post-Katrina New Orleans. Walter "Wolfman" Washington was playing, with Kevin O'Day on drums. I could think of nowhere else I would rather have been... The gig was set for 5:00, to skirt the curfew, but true to New Orleans form, it was closer to 7:00 when the beer was finally chilled and the band warmed up. The crowd was small but enthusiastic, a cross section of the usual Maple Leaf characters--a few student types, dancing the gangly-armed hippie dance, some middle-agers with wedding-party swing moves, one or two old timers beaming at the scene. When I heard the trombone, I knew I was home, and when Walter broke out "Ooh Poo Pah Doo," I settled into my bliss. And yes, I peed by candlelight, the generator power reserved for beer coolers and amplifiers. The MSNBC crew insured that the place was brighter than it has been for any Rebirth show I've seen there, but the men's room was lit by a single votive, perched ritually atop the urinal. Even the Bud Light tasted rare and remarkable for this night. When I finally had an Abita in my hand, and the band was rolling through an extended version of Kansas Joe McCoy's "When the Levee Breaks," I knew that the spirit of New Orleans was still haunting that empty cityscape, just waiting for enough of us to gather around and call it back to life.

- Swampish

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The curfew that night was at 8 pm, but the show carried on until 9, when the authorities finally closed it down. Hank is still convinced that the show would have run even longer “had the sax player not danced second line-style around an Ohio police car that was idling outside.”

Hank has always been good for a pithy remark to the press, but as he later recounted, the situation could have been very serious.

Most of the people patrolling (the neighborhood at the time) were from somewhere else. For some reason, the town of Xenon, Ohio, had several cars here. I'd never even heard of Xenon, Ohio. Anyway, one of the cars that was here about us violating curfew was from Xenon, Ohio. Then at one point, there were people dancing around it. I could tell this guy's freaked out. He has no clue. He doesn't know what second lines are. He just sees… I won't say scared, because a cop would take offense. Let's say he looked concerned.

There was a female officer [here] from second district (of New Orleans), and I hadn't really officially ever met her, but I'd seen her around for a few years. I knew she's a second district one. She comes in and at first she's real nice and she keeps saying, "You gotta shut it down," and I say, "That's right." I did what Carl Brown had advised me years ago with something else. He said if you're doing something the police don't want you to do, agree to everything and do nothing. That's what I was doing. I said absolutely, and then, you know. Then at a certain point, she comes in and basically she's going to arrest me. Somebody said she was at the door and they said, "She's going to arrest you." I said, "I hope she does. It'll be the best publicity I could get."

We had an NBC news camera here filming it.

Then as she's coming toward me, it suddenly hit me. There's no bail bondsman and there's no judges, and there's no lockup. Lockup was the bus station... Anybody who was arrested was taken to the bus station and they had to sleep outside where the buses are parked. There's no beds. There's no pillows. You lie down on concrete when you're so exhausted you can't stand anymore. You're lucky if you find a spot of concrete that doesn't have oil that's dripped on it.

I thought about it and I said, "Okay. Last call. Last call." The other thing was we had heard horror stories of people who... There was a problem with the curfew where if you worked until... The business was allowed to be open until whenever the curfew time was. Then there were these stories of people who had to stay at their place of work and then they're walking home and are arrested. Sometimes they stayed a week because there's no mechanism for providing services. I thought, well, "Last call!"

-- Hank Staples

402 There is no town of “Xenon, Ohio.” There is a “Xenia, Ohio.” It is unknown if they sent volunteer officers to New Orleans post-Katrina.
Brush with the law aside, evening overall was a resounding success. It garnered the bar a remarkable amount of publicity due to all the reporters in attendance. Walter and the Maple Leaf made the NBC *Saturday Evening News*! Reuters photographs from that night show audience members dancing and smiling, losing themselves in the moment to exhilaration and relief. It was cathartic. “We are still here!”

It was very emotional for most people. Lots of crying. Two people would see each other, go up, be hugging. Usually the woman and sometimes the guy would be crying. It was nice, just because it was like, I don't know, being through war or something and then you see who made it.

– Hank Staples

Two incidents at the Maple Leaf that night that would typify life in post-Katrina New Orleans, two scenes that would replay themselves over and over again throughout the city in the coming months. The first- and this occurred more than once that night- was the reconciliation between people who had not seen or heard from one another since before the storm. This was one of the very few moments of pure, intense, spontaneous joy that was available (and allowable) to residents of the Crescent City in those days. The other was the heavy-handed enforcement of the curfew. This was a source of constant fear and agitation, especially among service workers.

The Maple Leaf in the weeks and months following Katrina was a center of reconnection and reconciliation. It was the neighborhood spot to which people headed as soon as they got back to town- to find the friends, to hear the stories, to begin to try and piece things back together again. It is hard to fathom what it must be like to spend months wondering whether or not many of the people you know

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are dead. Seeing friends again for the first time in New Orleans in late 2005 and early 2006 nearly always included laughter, tears, and long, sustained hugs. Each reconciliation chipped away at the worry that had burdened the spirit. Every reconnection was a breath of fresh air for the soul. These reunions also strengthened the existing bonds of friendship, especially between people who had been unable to communicate with one another since before the storm.

Sure, most people had cell phones by then, but it wasn’t the epidemic it is today. When you wake up one morning and you’re all displaced, you realize, you see these people, talk to the people, coexist with these people several hours, several days a week, but all of a sudden it’s like... [Before,] if we need to talk to so and so, we just go down to the bar. I don’t know what their phone number is. I don’t know where they live. I got a question for Tommy, I’ll just run down. I bet he’s there. If he’s not, someone’ll tell me. Whatever.

— Jay Sayatovic

Back then we were still new enough to the Maple Leaf, that we didn’t have anybody’s phone numbers, and cell phones were just starting to text. Everyone we know learned to text message during Katrina because the cellular towers were down, but the text messages could go through. We literally were on the road [evacuating], learning how to send a text message, but we didn’t have anybody’s numbers from the Maple Leaf. We had no idea... A lot of people in the neighborhood just walked to everywhere. They don’t have cars. We were like, is anybody getting out of town? What’s going on? What’s going on?

— Kim Sayatovic

For many of the Maple Leaf regulars, the place that had created and nurtured these friendships would now morph into a place where these friendships were renewed and revitalized. Amidst all the grief, hardship, and anger associated with that time, New Orleanians still remember these reconciliations fondly. In the moment, they lived for them.

After six weeks, we finally got back in town. Literally, the very first thing we did was head straight to the Maple Leaf to start checking on people. Every day after work, we would go to the bar and sit at the bar, and every day it was like, “Oh, you’re back in town. Oh, you’re still alive.” We did that a lot.

— Kim Sayatovic

During the days though, we would go to the Leaf. If I remember correctly- which I probably don’t- it was a cash only, shoebox kind of system. Things were cool there until it got dark. We were still dealing with curfews and stuff then. They had a generator in back so they could do some music. Maybe not initially, but before the power came back on they were doing music. Anyhow, we stopped there after work. Historically, we were back of the bar, corner people. That was where all the locals and regulars would be, but after Katrina, everybody moved to that front corner right by the door, because everyday someone was getting back to town. You were glad to see him. There were stories to tell, stories to hear. It was a real joyous time just with the slow trickle-in of people. Don't think we paid for a drink for a few weeks. Hank I think was just pretty glad that people were coming back. Everything seemed to be on… somebody. No lie, for a couple of weeks there was one a day. People you were glad you could see. It was a big step in the return to normalcy.

– Jay Sayatovic

Musicians returned to the Maple Leaf in the same manner, and for many of the same reasons. Something was missing, and they needed to get it back. Organ guru John “Papa” Gros was one such musician. The Maple Leaf had incubated his own success and the success of his band Papa Grows Funk. The space was important to him, important to his art. Late in 2005, he spoke to Offbeat writer John Swenson about that time.

I got back the first Monday in [October], flew from Houston to New Orleans, went home to my house, checked everything out, then went straight to the Maple Leaf. They were up and running on a generator and I set my piano up in the dark on the stage and pointed it toward the bar and started playing. I was so homesick and I was glad to be playing music in New Orleans again. I opened up with “Stealin’ Back To My Same Old Used To Be.” I did three Monday nights on solo piano and then Papa Grows Funk started the week before Halloween night.”

– John “Papa” Gros

Acclaimed filmmaker Robert Mugge would capture part of that year’s Papa Gros Funk Halloween performance at the Maple Leaf for his 2006 documentary New Orleans Music in Exile. House artist Frenchy returned to the city around the same time, having spent much of the previous month flying around the country painting

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409 John Swenson, “Katrina Blues.”
the various New Orleans benefit concerts that were taking place. But he was eager
to get back on his home court. He would finally get a chance to paint at the Maple
Leaf once again during one of those early John Gros performances.

[It was] actually John Gros. John Gros, and I think maybe Jellybean on drums,
something like that. But John was playing on keyboards to the... [facing towards] the
bar, and I was painting from the stage, behind John. Because the stage was empty
and dark. Yeah... I think about it. It was awesome, because we were owning it. We
were getting it back.

- Frenchy

The Maple Leaf would continue to provide catharsis and rejuvenation to
returning New Orleanians throughout 2006 and into 2007. Before the storm, fun
had been a readily available commodity in the city of New Orleans. It was in many
ways the city's chief cultural export. In the years after the storm, fun was as scarce
in New Orleans as generous insurance settlements. But New Orleanians knew one
place they could always find it. Chris Rose, a Times-Picayune columnist who won a
Pulitzer for his Katrina columns, wrote eloquently and passionately about his first
post-Katrina Rebirth Brass Band show at the Maple Leaf, which he attended in the
summer of 2006. “Long before Katrina,” he explains, “the Rebirth shows at the
Maple Leaf were where I’d drop in from time to time to remind myself why I live
here, why I love here. Why I am here.” Rose ventured up to Oak Street that summer
night to try and rekindle that love and perhaps regain a bit of that certainty. Most of
all, he just needed to have a little fun.

"Bounce" is the name of another kind of New Orleans music, our unique and
commercially successful ghetto rap scene, but it should be the name for brass-band
music, too. Because that's what you end up doing. Bouncing.

It’s impossible not to. If you can’t dance to this, you are on life support or maybe
already dead.

Randy Frechette, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 2017.
If I don’t feel better after doing this, I told myself on the way to the Maple Leaf, then I am irretrievable.

But I did. In the thick of a too-hot crowd full of strangers and old friends, watching 10, 11, maybe a dozen guys packed on a too-small stage under bare light bulbs and a pressed-tin ceiling, feeling the release of the fist-thrusting call-and-response, staring into a wall of horns whose music is so muscular that it almost takes on a physical manifestation and reaches out and beats you about the head and grabs your collar and screams in your face: “You are ALIVE, boy! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?” And I do. And I am home again.

– Chris Rose

In the months proceeding Hurricane Katrina, the phrase “That which does not kill us only makes us stronger” was about as popular in New Orleans as “How’d ya make out?” Uttering either was liable to earn the utterer a smack upside the head from a weary rebuilder who had heard it one too many times. But in many ways, Katrina did just that for the denizens of Oak Street. The stormed strengthened existing bonds and created new ones where they had not existed before. The Maple Leaf not only survived, it prospered.

Now that a decade has passed and much of the PTSD has worn off, some of the survivors look back on the time with as much fondness as anger and grief. For many, it is a badge of honor. We made it. We survived. We weren’t washed away. We are still here.

Oh, it was the wild west. For sure. It really was the wild west. Especially right after Katrina. That was crazy but it was also the best. It was like, everything was fucked except our love. Also, that the Maple Leaf had been saved was like... We were like the chosen people of Katrina. You know what I mean?

– Karina Nathan

CH. 10- FREEDOM TO EXPERIMENT

According to longtime New Orleans music journalist Keith Spera, “In a town known for its drummers, Johnny Vidacovich is arguably New Orleans’ grand master of percussion.”\textsuperscript{413} Johnny Vidacovich played his first gigs when he was 12 years old with Dunc’s Honky-Tonks, a “kid band” assembled by a neighborhood junkyard operator that performed traditional jazz at “old folks' homes, veterans hospital, Lighthouse for the Blind, Home for the Incurables, Little Sisters of the Poor” and the like.\textsuperscript{414} Since then, he’s toured behind artists as diverse as Johnny Adams, Mose Allison, and Professor Longhair, and also as part of his own long-running progressive jazz group Astral Project. Since the eighties, he has taught generations of drum students as part of the faculty at his alma mater, Loyola University. One of the most in-demand session and gig drummers in New Orleans today, he was recently awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award in Music by \textit{Offbeat Magazine} at their 2016 Best of The Beat Awards.\textsuperscript{415}

George Porter, Jr. is best known as the bass player for The Meters, who got their start as a studio band for producer Allen Toussaint in the late sixties. Today

\textsuperscript{413} Keith Spera, “Keith Spera’s Sound Check: Shows You Need To Know About In New Orleans from May 26 to June 1,” \textit{New Orleans Advocate}, May 25, 2016, \url{http://www.theadvocate.com/new_orleans/entertainment_life/music/article_aabe2e7c-85c4-5ad8-826f-8d89b1f10159.html}.

\textsuperscript{414} Johnny Vidacovich, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.

the Meters are widely considered to be one of the originators of funk music. Since then, he has recorded with artists as diverse as David Byrne, Tori Amos, and Robbie Robertson, and has recorded and toured with his own bands. He got himself a Lifetime Achievement Award from *Offbeat Magazine* in 2012.416

Porter and Vidacovich first met each other while performing on Bourbon Street in the sixties. They played different clubs, but took their breaks at the same hamburger stand.417 Over the years, they have played together frequently. Their most recent collaboration, which has come to be known as “The Trio,” began in late 2000 at the Old Point Bar across the river in the Algiers Point neighborhood. The early shows Trio shows typically featured June Yamagishi on guitar as the third member.

The Trio performed on Wednesdays at the Old Point for a couple of years, then moved to Thursdays at Tipitina’s for the first half of 2004. These were not the only gigs for this configuration; indeed, both men play regularly in various ad-hoc bands in a variety of configurations. But this weekly gig was the only standing one. The line-up of the Trio was and is fluid. Vidacovich was always on drums, Porter was usually on bass, but Yamagishi’s appearances became less regular over time, as he was also playing and touring with Papa Grows Funk then. On August 27, 2004, the Trio played its first Thursday gig at the Maple Leaf Bar. Porter couldn’t be there that night; the line-up that night was Vidacovich, his long-time rhythm-mate and Astral Project bandmember James Singleton, and Robert Walter, a California-born...

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organ player who had recently moved to New Orleans. With a few exceptions, the Trio (known variously as The Trio, The Trio featuring Johnny Vidacovich, or the Johnny Vidacovich Trio) has held the Thursday night slot on the Oak Street stage ever since.

One decision that was made then the “group” moved to the Maple Leaf is that the third member of the Trio would be different every week, selected and booked by Vidacovich’s wife, Deborah. The only constant of the Trio shows—aside from Vidacovich—is that they never write out a setlist beforehand. Everything is improvised. “That gig was the very first gig that I ever really got to play where it wasn’t like we had a setlist,” remembers Porter. “It wasn’t music that was laid out, although there was some common music that we would lean on every now and then, but most of the time it was just Johnny saying poems and singing things and I would play a bass line and he’ll start a groove...” When asked why he thought this sort of free-form improvisation would appeal to paying customers at a venue that wasn’t a jazz club, the longtime jazzman responds that he never really considered it. “I didn’t think it would work or would not work,” Vidacovich says. “I was more concerned about just trying to get guys to play and get guys paid. If it would work, it wouldn’t be because of anything I did or didn’t do out of the norm.”

The format of the Trio gigs would serve as inspiration for a new George Porter project in 2015. When Papa Grows Funk went on “indefinite hiatus” in the middle of 2013, the Maple Leaf cast around for a couple of years in hopes of finding

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419 George Porter, Jr., interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
a permanent replacement. Jon Cleary played a few shows with his Absolute Monster
Gentlemen. George Porter Jr., already spending most Thursday nights on the small
Oak Street stage, agreed to fill in on Mondays for a few weeks. He decided to use the
opportunity to give the members of his band, the Runnin’ Pardners, some extra
work.

The first time I did it... I was saying, "I'll rotate the guys in my band and keep my
Runnin' Pardners working." None of us was working on Monday nights anyway. I
think I did the first one with the keyboards, bass, and drums. The second with
guitar, bass, and drums, and the third with the saxophone, bass, and drums. After
scrutinizing the three nights musically (Porter records every performance and has
for decades), I realized that the keyboards, bass, and drums made way, way more
sense. The guitar, bass, and drums leaned on being a blues gig, which I didn't want
to get into. I didn't want to be a blues band. I wanted to be able to stretch out...

The first half hour of those (trio) gigs are usually right off the top of the head. The
first piece, the very first piece of music is usually something we've never played
before.

- George Porter, Jr.422

Saxophonist Khris Royal plays with the Runnin’ Pardners, and likes to come
jam with the trio on Mondays whenever he has the opportunity. He attests to the
benefits that being given the freedom to experiment bring to the band’s regular
performances.

I come to jam with [the Porter Trio] maybe two or three times a month... Then,
when we go back to playing Running Partners stuff, it's totally new, because there's
all these things that have happened across the months at these jamming gigs on
Mondays. Then, we go back to playing the more regimented Running Partners stuff,
and it's like, it's fresh. It makes it brand-new again.

- Khris Royal423

According to Johnny Vidacovich, it is the connection between the crowd and
the musicians that makes this creativity possible. A music teacher for more than
three decades, Vidacovich’s perspective is equal parts philosophical and practical.

It’s not me just playing my instrument, and it’s not just you there in the audience. If you’re not there in the audience, there’s not going to be any music. I can play the drums until I’m blue in the face; there has to be somebody in the audience. It is my equation that the musician plus the audience equals the music.

…The drums and the music are based on reflection, reflective surfaces, especially drums. Like my drums, no matter how I tune the drum in my living room, as soon as I go to a bar room or another place, the bass drum is going to sound completely different… That’s what makes the drum sound a little bit this way and a little bit that way. So the music is basically triggering the environment. So I also think that music triggers the audience and I think the audience, as they receive the sound waves and the molecular structures and the atoms touching them on their skin and going in their ears, they emit waves of molecules that return to the musician and it becomes a circular activity.

The music comes through the musicians’ instruments into the crowd’s skin and ears and their feelings send out certain molecular structures that wave back to the musicians that sometimes they feel "Oh, they ain’t getting it; this crowd don’t like it. [Or] oh- this crowd is really into it.” And that’s how you know. It’s not anything secret and mystical. It’s basic science. It’s basic physics- sound waves, molecules, moving air.

- Johnny Vidacovich

Vidacovich also attests to the Maple Leaf’s unique qualities as a creative space.

…The Maple Leaf is that place to see how far you can push it, do experiments, play music that nobody’s ever heard of with people they never heard of before. For me, the Maple Leaf is not only a place where [the audience’s] minds get blown; my mind gets blown. Some of the most creative, new music I’ve ever played in my life, I played in the Maple Leaf.

- Johnny Vidacovich

Royal also finds the Maple Leaf to be invaluable as a creative space. He credits the crowd for giving the musicians the space to stretch out. “Here (at the Maple Leaf), you can go as far as you can think to go... and people will be right there with you,” he explains. “If you get too out, or you want to try something new, they’re still going to have your back, no matter what. You try to pull that on Frenchman (Street), you start playing [something] people don’t feel, just a little bit, they’re going to walk up the street because they can go next door for free.”

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While Royal is too busy to anchor his own long-term residency, he has undertaken a few monthly residencies—typically on Wednesdays—with his band Dark Matter, and generally likes to perform with his band at the Maple Leaf as often as he has the opportunity. He contrasts the environment at the Maple Leaf to playing on the tourist-heavy Frenchman Street when Dark Matter was just getting started. Those shows required repetition and standardization; at the Maple Leaf, he goes the extra mile to avoid that.

...Playing at Blue Nile (on Frenchman Street), we had our core people who would come every week, obviously, but... most of [the crowd] was just random tourists that were walking down the street. At that time, the show was geared towards people that hadn't really heard us. And then we came [to the Maple Leaf], it was like, we can gear the show towards people who really know the material. We can change it up, experiment a little bit... I want to keep it fresh all the time, because people will come in and see us consistently, whereas, it's different playing for tourists. You've got to play covers or play things they know, and here we can just play our music... I try to make every gig we play [at the Maple Leaf] different. I don't want [it] to seem like, “Oh, Dark matter is playing. Again.” [I] try to make it an event.

- Khris Royal

Iguanas bassist René Coman credits improvisation for drawing a particular type of crowd that enjoys it, and for his band being able to work multiple nights in the same city, is a rarity for many musicians, who often have to rely on touring.

Being a dance band... If you're just a songwriter band, people go and see you, if they see you once every couple of months, that's enough because they've heard you. “You sound great, loved it. I don't need to come back and hear the same thing tomorrow night.” But if you're a dance band, people who are into dancing- they don't mind dancing to the same song, because you're not going to play it exactly the same way. It's not going to have exactly the... It's going to be rendered fresh before your eyes as it is every time we invent this on the spot. Because there is the dance element to it, you could have people coming back, people see you on Friday. ”I loved it. I came back on Sunday.”

- René Coman

Wednesdays at the Maple Leaf have been given over to four-to-six week residencies for a couple of decades now, and provide musicians with a space to

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explore new directions and try new projects. Both Royal and drummer Derrick Freeman- who had just performed the final night of his own month-long Wednesday residency the day before his interview- attest to not only the freedom allowed, but the results it can produce. Royals first time on the Maple Leaf stage- which took place while he was still in high school- happened during a Wednesday residency of trumpeter Maurice Brown, who found wider success and is still touring with the project he was testing out at the Maple Leaf, Soul’d You Out.

...Wednesdays here have always been. You talk about being free to experiment, that's always been an experimental night. That's the night they encourage people to come and try out things, and [my first night on the Maple Leaf stage] was when [Maurice] was first starting "Soul’d U Out", so another example of Maple Leaf being a great place to experiment, and that band went on to do great things, and then it morphed into what he's doing now.

- Khris Royal

It's cool, because... I use it as a time to work out new shit. Like, the blue-eyed soul thing is something I've been trying to do for a while. So just putting it together, even just for a little set at the Leaf is like, "Okay, that's something we could actually do in the future, you know?" So it's good for that. It's good for trying out your new projects. Because we're there because people are there to listen to music. They'll actually give you a chance to try something out on them, which is a rare thing in this business nowadays. People want this product... The Leaf is somewhere that's like, "You know what, I kind of want to start a Brazilian band. Let's see what happens." [Or], "I want to start a hip-hop cover band. Let's just go to try it out." Next thing you know, you're like, "Oh shit, we just sold out Tipitina's... I guess that worked." ...[The Maple Leaf is] the best place to experiment.

- Derrick Freeman

Both Porter and Royal also credit Hanks Staples for providing an environment where musicians feel comfortable to create without too much undue pressure on numbers, and also encouraging musicians to branch out, even if some of the old-timers may not like it.

429 The Blue-Eyed Soul Review, which he had performed at two of his four Wednesdays. The other two were a hip-hop review.
[In other clubs there are] more demands was being made on the bands to play music that's going to put bodies in the place... I'm not saying that the Maple Leaf don't need to do that, but I don't think that the Maple Leaf has put that thing on the bands that, "Man, if you don't have 75 people in here, then we giving the spot to somebody else to make this gig."...You've got a bunch of clubs on Frenchman Street, not a bunch, but a few clubs on Frenchman Street, where the bands are working strictly for the gate. Whatever comes in the front door, that's what you get. You get no money off the bar. You don't get no money, and if the bar makes a killing that night, but you don't make your gate, that's on you. The Maple Leaf has not done anything like that.

- George Porter, Jr.

[Hank] likes it when we keep it different, you know... He's the chillest. Hank is. He's pretty laid-back... That's what's dope about this place. You can experiment and do weird stuff because you know you have that freedom, because of him. He's the one that's like, "Yo, do you."

Last time I did a residency, one night we did electronic night, and I remember someone older cats that hang here hating it. They're like, "What is this trash? What the hell are they playing?" It was pretty funny... [But] that's one of the things Hank likes- [that] we're pushing The Maple Leaf... He was talking to me the other day. He was like, "You're the younger generation. You're the young face here, you know." So that's why he wants me to do those types of things and stretch out. It's cool. Because... a lot of people that hang here are older. [The Maple Leaf] needs something to bring younger people in here. So as much as [the regular crowd] may have hated [electronic night], it was a good thing (for the Leaf).

- Khris Royal

Musicians, employees, and patrons credit Hank for creating an environment where they feel comfortable off the stage, which results in the Maple Leaf being a hangout for off-duty musicians.

[There] is probably one word that describes Hank- I would say unique, I would say unique. He's unlike any bar owner I ever met in my life, ever. Whether that's good or bad, I think it's probably a combination of both. But he's just a big fan of music, he loves music, [and] I think he, more than anything, he wants his room to be a place that musicians can come and feel very, very comfortable being in.

- George Porter, Jr.

I think [the musicians] feel treated well. I think a lot of places... they just don't. Guys wouldn't want to go hang out at [any] place that they play at 'cause that's just a place I play at. How many people I ever see at Tipitina's at any given time just hanging' out? ...Maybe it's 'cause Hank let's them in. A lot of guys they just want to step in and step out. A lot of places don't really know their musicians that well. I don't think D.B.A. knows every single person that plays there, every doorman knows every person that comes through there. I don't think that happens. I think Hank

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allows that, he kind of allows it to nurture itself. That’s another thing, you go to hang out and at any given time there’d be 6 musicians in there you could talk to.

- Tracey Freeman\textsuperscript{434}

This welcoming environment leads to musicians congregating, which leads to networking, which leads to gigs. Several musicians interviewed mentioned gigs they had picked up just by hanging out at the Maple Leaf.

That's how I met most of the people I got gigs with before I was in the Suspects. New Orleans is a very- you gotta be seen to get gigs kind of town. You have to be out and about.... When you do go out and you do see other musicians, this happens to be the kind of town where, like "Oh man, I’ve got a gig on Thursday, but I have no piano player. You want to play on Thursday?" Boom. I’ll play on Thursday. And then you’re out playing on Thursday and the bass player in that gig you’ve never played with is like "Man, I like your playing. I’ve got this thing I do on Sundays if you want to come and check that out." The currency kind of is actually being around town. So yeah that happened all the time. That's how I met Johnny Sketch and started playing with those guys a lot. I did a lot of gigs with Kirk Joseph and those cats. I used to play a lot with Billy Iuso and then Juan Pardo the Indian chief all because you're out and about and you see someone and they don't have a piano player for the particular gig.

- CR Gruver\textsuperscript{435}

Prime example of that: I hadn't been here for Rebirth in, like, maybe five years, and last week I came on Tuesday and hung out, and I left with three gigs. I'm texting my girlfriend like, "Yo- I need to hang more." Because all I did was show up. I didn't even play, and just from talking to people I got three gigs... I got a gig with New Orleans Suspects... I got a recording session with Jason Ricci, and there was something else. I can't remember what else it was... but that was just from hanging, and people have seen me like, "Oh, yeah- I forgot about you."

- Khris Royal\textsuperscript{436}

With all those musicians milling around, it’s only natural that collaborations and even whole bands might result. Banjoist John Chaffe told a Times-Picayune reporter in 1986 that the Louisiana Repertory Jazz Ensemble was “formed at the Maple Leaf.”\textsuperscript{437} The core of popular eighties rock n’ roll band the Song Dogs found

\textsuperscript{434} Tracey Freeman, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
\textsuperscript{436} Khris Royal, interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, May 2017.
\textsuperscript{437} Vincent Fumar, “Keeping Alive The Beginnings of Jazz,” Times-Picayune, June 20, 1986, Lagniappe.
one another in the barroom as well. After Katrina there were two bands whose genesis was at the Maple Leaf that would go on to have significant impact on the New Orleans music scene and even develop a national following.

In 2006, former Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown keyboardist Joe Krown purchased a 1958 Hammond B-3 organ. It was Krown’s second organ, and he needed somewhere to keep it. Krown had a history with the Maple Leaf, having led traditional piano night on Mondays in the late nineties before Papa Grows Funk took over the slot. Krown proposed to Hank that he start a Sunday night residency with a trio that would include him and New Orleans funk and soul legend (and Maple Leaf stalwart) Walter “Wolfman” Washington. As part of the deal, he would leave his new B-3 onstage at the Maple Leaf, where any band could use it. Hank suggested they round out the group with a well-known drummer. After several auditions, Krown and Washington settled on funky Meters drummer Russell Batiste. The first Times-Picayune listing with all three names on the bill is for Sunday, June 10, 2007.

All three men were involved with other projects, so the trio was initially very much a sideline, something to do on a Sunday (“...you hardly ever have any other conflicting gigs on Sunday night.” – Iguanas bassist René Coman). They quickly realized they had strong chemistry. They recorded a live CD in 2008, which promptly won the Offbeat Beat of The Beat Award for best R&B/Funk CD in 2009. They also picked up a Big Easy Award for “Best Rhythm and Blues Band” the same

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year. \(^{441}\) “Just trying to have something to do on Sunday nights has turned into a main focus for me,” Krown told a reporter in 2011. \(^{442}\) The trio now plays the Jazz and Heritage Festival regularly and have released two more CDs. They have also toured American and internationally, but can still be found most every Sunday night on Oak Street.

Amazingly, the New Orleans Suspects are even more of a product of the Maple Leaf than the Sunday night trio. In 2009, there was a hole in the schedule, so Hank called Dirty Dozen Brass Band guitarist Jake Eckert to see if he could round up a band. “Who do you want to be in the band?” asked Eckert. “Just get the usual suspects,” was the reply. \(^{443}\) Eckert called keyboardist CR Gruver, bassist Reggie Scanlan, drummer Kevin O’Day, and guitarist Sam Hotchkiss.

I got a call one night from Kevin O’Day, who was a friend of mine - great drummer - and he goes, “Hey- Hank just called me. They need a band at the Leaf. You in town?” “Yeah, I’m in town.” He said, “Can you do it?” I said, “Yeah, it’d be fun.” So I went over there and Jack Eckert and CR Gruver were on the gig, who I never met. It’s like, “Okay, what do we know?” Bang, and we just started playing. And at the end of the night, we had such a good time… we told Hank, “Look, if you ever need a band again, call us up. If we’re all in town, we’ll do it!”

- Reggie Scanlan\(^{444}\)

“The chemistry was great,” remembers Gruver. “We had a really good time together. We had a similar language of music that we knew together. So that was really the beginning of it.” \(^{445}\)

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Hank did call back; the next time, they were billed as the “Usual Suspects.” The more they played together, the more the chemistry improved, even if the line-up changed slightly. Hotchkiss went on to pursue other projects, and his eventual replacement was saxophonist Jeff Watkins, who had been James Brown’s bandleader for the final twelve years of his career. Kevin O’Day moved to California, and Scanlan brought in Neville Brothers drummer “Mean” Willie Green. By 2011, with Scanlan’s Radiators and the Neville Brothers winding down, they decided to become a band full-time. “So that’s when we changed our name to the New Orleans Suspects because we wanted the name of the band to tell people what we did so that we could maybe gain a crowd a little faster,” says Gruver.446

Since their auspicious beginning, the New Orleans Suspects have toured the nation regularly and released four albums, including 2012’s *Caught Life at The Leaf*, recorded at the band’s birthplace on Oak Street. They have collaborated with bands as diverse as Widespread Panic and Marcia Ball and have toured with Tower of Power and guitarists Paul Barrere and Fred Tackett from Little Feat.

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Ch. 11- CONCLUSION

For more than four decades, the Maple Leaf Bar has connected the people of New Orleans with the music of their city, state, and surrounding area. In doing so, it has helped to preserve, propagate, and perpetuate the intangible cultural heritage of a large and diverse region. The Maple Leaf played a key role in the dissemination and contemporary popularization of this heritage in New Orleans, and now serves as a physical embodiment of this intangible tradition. It is a link between the past and the future of this heritage and a home to its present. By fostering the community that fuels the participatory spirit of this music, the Maple Leaf actually exerts a direct influence on the creation, presentation, and even the interpretation of this cultural heritage. In a very real way, the Maple Leaf puts its own stamp on the music of New Orleans.

The Maple Leaf is a storehouse of history, but it is not an artifact. It is a guardian of tradition, but not an enforcer of custom. It promotes culture, but does not advocate conformity. It wields influence, but not power. It creates, but does not produce. It is unintentional, but it is not accidental.

It’s hard to find suitable parallels for the Maple Leaf. Not many new businesses find themselves inadvertently part of the vanguard in the revival of a largely forgotten and abandoned industry. In 1974 most live music in New Orleans was limited to a couple of fancy hotels, some general event spaces, a handful of
isolated clubs, and the tourist-centric jazz of the French Quarter. Presumably a somewhat vibrant scene existed within a network of small predominantly black neighborhood joints. But after changing tastes and desegregation had precipitated the downfall of the large black nightclub scene that thrived in the forties, fifties, and sixties, whatever remained went largely unnoticed by mainstream sources and available information about it is tantalizingly rare.

The Jazz and Heritage Festival began in 1970 and did an admirable job of presenting an array of local and regional talent to large audiences, but it was one weekend in the spring (it would expand to two weekends in 1976). By 1974, these effects had yet to be felt in the rest of the year or the city.

The motivations of the early pioneers in this era of the New Orleans music club business seem to confirm that a potential for success was largely unnoticed by the more entrepreneurial-minded types, especially in Uptown. A reporter once asked Jed Palmer why he began hosting live music at his University Inn on Oak Street in 1973 when virtually no one else Uptown was doing so. Palmer’s response: “Boredom.”447 The Maple Leaf only wandered into the business because Tom Bethell decided that he wanted a jazz band to play on the opening night of his new bar. Tipitina’s was opened in 1977 for the express purpose of hosting live music, but it was specifically the music preferred by the owners and effectively performed for them and their friends.

But by the end of the decade, however, the floodgates had burst open. The entertainment calendar in the June 22, 1979 edition of the States-Item has music

listings for 66 different “Nightclubs.” For reference, the June 18, 1975 *States-Item* calendar has five listings and the one from July 2, 1977 has twelve. While some of the gains can likely be attributed to better collection and cultivation on the part of the newspaper, the fact remains that a substantial “scene” sprang up around the city in a few short years.

So what happened? Were all the components for a thriving live music culture simply hiding in plain sight waiting for a signal? And how was the Maple Leaf able to inadvertently establish itself as one of the most important elements of this new culture and eventually outlast almost all its contemporaries? The best way to answer these questions is to understand how the live music landscape got to where it was in 1974. Broadly, it took time for the New Orleans “scene” to recover from the disruptions of the sixties. Most of the United States experienced massive upheaval and change during the nineteen-sixties, and the country that emerged in the nineteen-seventies was radically different than the one that had begun the previous decade. All levels of society found themselves having to rebuild and replace institutions that had been torn down, and this took time.

In regards to the New Orleans live music scene, most of the clubs of the R&B era of the forties, fifties, and early sixties had featured R&B music (with a few notable exceptions, such as in the French Quarter). But R&B’s popularity nosedived in the early sixties. Even though clubs in New Orleans were strictly separated by a racial boundary, black and white clubs alike felt the sting of the crash. The British

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448 “The Calendar,” *States-Item*, June 22, 1979, Sec. B.
invasion took most of the white audience in 1964, practically overnight. Jim Russell had been a disc jockey and a promoter in New Orleans during the R&B era.

I’d had eighteen disc jockeys and sixty bands. Three to six months after the invasion, we were completely disintegrated. Nothing. Because all of our bands had saxophones. How the hell do you find a guitar player overnight, when there’s only two or three in the whole city?

-Jim Russell

The rise in popularity of soul and Motown took a significant portion of the black R&B audience, most notably its younger members. Whatever the Temptations left behind was claimed by desegregation. “Separate but equal” had essentially created a captive market for black nightclubs; once this restriction was removed, many of them could not hold onto their customers. These national blows were compounded locally by a crusading District Attorney named Jim Garrison who had vowed to eliminate vice from, of all places, the nightlife of New Orleans. “The club work that useta be so plentiful evaporated between sixty-one and sixty-three,” remembered Dr. John. “It seemed to me mosta da clubs he was padlockin’ was da joints that was somewhat available for gigs.”

On top of all this, the leadership of the black musicians’ union Local 496 (it wouldn’t merge with the white musicians union- Local 174- until 1971) was corrupt and arrogant. They were antagonistic and borderline feudalistic in their relations with their membership. They also began feuding with people from the local recording industry. This compounded problems, because with the clubs closing down, session work became more and more precious to musicians trying to earn a

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451 Berry, Foose, Jones, *Up From The Cradle*, 145.
living, and with the British Invasion and Motown eating into their sales, record companies neither had the resources or the patience engage in frustrating and expensive fights with a corrupt union. Several independent labels in New Orleans either folded or left town. By the middle of the decade, the recording industry in New Orleans had basically collapsed. As club gigs and session work both dried up, many musicians left for greener pastures on one of the coasts or stayed home and got straight jobs.

It took about a decade for the New Orleans music scene to begin to recover from these successive calamities. By the mid-seventies, a few prodigal musicians began to return to New Orleans, some frustrated at not having been able to find sustained success in the promised land, others just homesick. Ten years had also been enough time for a new generation of musicians to come of age and begin to try and make their way into the professional ranks. Many of these up-and-comers, having heard the horror stores of the previous decade, had no interest in joining the union. The influence of organized labor was by this time declining all across all sectors in the United States, and the New Orleans musicians' union had spent the years preceding this decline repeatedly shooting itself in the foot. The seventies also introduced a new generation of club owners, many of who had no interest in working with the union and some of whom were actively hostile to it. They saw little upside in the restrictions, fees, and general hassle that came with working with a union. Musicians and club owners alike simply said, “No,” which depressed union

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452 Berry, Foose, Jones, *Up From The Cradle*, 145.
power even further, which in turn freed even more opportunities for those forging
their own way.

But where did the audiences come from? This is a much more difficult
question to answer. In a 1992 journal article for *The American Historical Review,*
historian Lawrence W. Levine observed, “the audience remains the missing link, the
forgotten element in cultural history. The creation, the creator, and the context are
often accounted for; the constituency remains shadowy and neglected.”

Levine’s twenty-five year old observation still holds true today. There is no real way to know
how or why the nascent live music scene in New Orleans was able to attract such a
large audience so soon into its re-emergence. Perhaps they were all on standby,
waiting patiently for a market to catch up to their needs. Perhaps it was sparked by
the end of the Vietnam War, a widespread celebration and blowing off of steam in
the face of the receding specter of the draft. Perhaps it was a reaction against disco
and/or punk, the two more popular, pervasive, and divisive genres of music at the
time. All of this is just speculation, and much of it probably fanciful. Absent some
manner of data, there is no real way to know.

However, while the desires and motivations of this audience cannot be
known, what is known is what the Maple Leaf had to offer them and how they
responded to it. The Maple Leaf presented its patrons musical offerings with a
reliability that they couldn’t really get anywhere else. What set the Maple Leaf apart
was both variety and regularity. People who wanted to hear traditional jazz without
the hassle of going into the French Quarter and integrating themselves among the

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453 Lawrence W. Levine, “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its
tourists could simply go uptown. For fans of Cajun or Zydeco music, the Maple Leaf was effectively the only game in town until the early nineties. In addition to music, the Maple Leaf also had a reputation for being a great place for dancing, whether one liked to dance to Cajun, or Zydeco, or traditional Jazz, or later to the Iguanas, or Rebirth Brass Band. People who liked to dance knew this and as a result they gravitated to Oak Street.

The Maple Leaf didn’t have a monopoly over any of these diversions. But as mentioned before, fans of Zydeco didn’t have to keep up with multiple schedules and listings in hopes of catching a show. They could just go to the Maple Leaf on a Friday and see Rockin’ Dopsie. The same is true today for fans of brass band music (Tuesday) or experimental improvisation (Monday/Thursday).

Not only are the Maple Leaf’s musical wares dependable, the quality is exceptional and the caliber of musicianship is impressive. Rockin’ Dopsie was one of the originators of Zydeco music. George Porter, Jr. and Johnny Vidacovich are two of the most visible, respected, and in-demand musicians in the city. Rebirth is the most popular brass band in the world (and the only one with a Grammy) and their weekly gigs at the Maple Leaf - a place that barely holds 300 people- are so much a part of their reputation and identity that even the President wants to catch one! In 2015, while speaking at the Andrew Sanchez Community Center in the Lower 9th Ward on the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, President Obama commented that, “And
one day, after I leave office, maybe I'll finally hear Rebirth at the Maple Leaf on Tuesday night.”

What sets the Maple Leaf apart from other music clubs in the city is its long-term relationships with some of their best musicians in New Orleans, their fans, and its own regular patrons. One can see great brass bands in a variety of locales most days of any given week in New Orleans. But there is only one place where one can reliably see Rebirth Brass Band every Tuesday. There is good funk and soul to be had any night of the week in the Crescent City, but only one place to spend a Sunday evening with Joe Krown, Walter “Wolfman” Washington, and Russell Batiste. And there’s nowhere else to see anything quite like Johnny Vidacovich’s Thursday night Trio shows.

Musical performance is a cornerstone of the culture of New Orleans and a key component of the city’s identity. The interaction between a musician and an audience is fundamental to the music itself. Musicians in the city take it as a point of pride that they can and do perform almost anywhere at almost any time. Even in an environment such as that, the Maple Leaf stands out as a significant performance space, not only because of the performances that have taken place there, but also because of how its environment contributes to the growth and evolution of the music itself. The Maple Leaf connects New Orleanians to their native music, and it is in this connection where there music truly lives. “I think the Leaf is like... It’s a rare

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and most wonderful thing,” says George Porter, Jr., “that the people will hold onto that for as long as, long as, forever.”

455 George Porter, Jr., interview with author, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2017.
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