

LOUISIANA MUSIC: A PRIMER

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The Mississippi River was the baptismal water of the young Mahalia Jackson, the gospel legend who would take her melodic message from her hometown of New Orleans to the world. Although Jackson left the city at age 15 and thereafter would call Chicago her home, she continued to embrace the flavor of New Orleans in her vocal style and fabled cooking. She was to gospel as the trumpeter and vocalist Louis Armstrong was to jazz; both legends became ambassadors of New Orleans and its rich musical heritage.

Fittingly, the Mahalia Jackson Theater for the Performing Arts is located inside Louis Armstrong Park just across North Rampart Street from the French Quarter. Jackson, who died on January 27, 1972, was laid to rest at Providence Memorial Park on Airline Drive in Metairie, La.

Gospel music is part and parcel of Louisiana life, and other noteworthy gospel groups include the Zion Travelers Spiritual Singer from Scotlandville, well-known in Baton Rouge. The Zion Travelers' unique *a capella* vocals have been broadcast in Baton Rouge every Sunday morning since 1946.

Shreveport's Ever Ready Gospel Singers were founded in 1946, and are still performing. They were featured in Robert Mudge's 2000 film, *Rhythms 'n' Bayous*.

The annual New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival has introduced locals and visitors alike to the wealth of gospel artists in the state with its "Gospel Tent." It showcases a great range of the genre's styles including old-time, testifying quartets such as the popular Charles Jackson and the Jackson Travelers and the incredible, country-tinged Electrifying Crown Seekers (with a soloist who sings in falsetto and then goes up for the high notes!). Church choirs like the mighty Tyrone Foster and the Arc Singers and the strong young voices from school ensembles such as the McDonogh 35 High School Choir bring great exuberance.

Family gospel groups are in abundance throughout New Orleans. Lois Dejan, a mover

and shaker in the gospel community, has sung for 72 years, following in the musical footsteps of her father and grandfather. When her family ensemble, the Johnson Extension, takes the stage it represents six generations of vocalists.

For the last 25 years, Dejan has presented the Mahalia Jackson International Rejoice in the Park gospel festival. The free event, which takes place in the fall at Louis Armstrong Park, celebrates the coming together of families, of youth and the elderly and of people of faith from New Orleans and the world. This year it will be held on October 19.

Because of the popularity of gospel music with secular listeners, New Orleans has long enjoyed a reputation for its legendary jazz brunches. House of Blues, at 225 Decatur St., created the first-of-its-kind gospel brunch—a warm, lively affair with family seating, a full buffet and omelet station. The show, which begins at 10:30 a.m., is hosted by the always smiling Jo "Cool" Davis, a regular Jazz Fest performer, sings

in a style that is influenced by artists such as Bobby "Blue" Bland and Sam Cooke. No mention of gospel music in New Orleans would be complete without praising one of the city's oldest and most beloved groups, the Zion Harmonizers, which performs often at House of Blues including on March 10, 2013.

This ensemble was founded by Benjamin Maxon; the locally-beloved Sherman Washington took over its leadership in 1942. Washington, who also coordinated the Jazz Fest's Gospel Tent, led the group until his death on March 14, 2011. Noted for its tradi-

tional gospel quartet style and a cappella singing, today's lineup carries on the rich heritage of its originators.

Gospel music rings out of churches all over the state while it is also at home at festivals and in clubs. Hymns like "I'll Fly Away" are blown by brass bands on New Orleans streets and gospel classics have been recorded by renowned vocalist Aaron Neville on his 2010 album *I Know I've Been Changed*. Sacred music has even entered the sports arena, as football fans cheer on their team with "When the Saints Go Marching In"—a major factor in the fascinating world of Louisiana music.

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Mahalia Jackson



The Jazz Fest Gospel Tent

