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New Orleans responds to strife, as always, with song

A number of songs have sprung up in reaction to the gulf oil spill, bringing the city together and giving vent to collective anger.

By Alana Semuels, Los Angeles Times
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Reporting from New Orleans —Ben Jaffe, the tuba player and creative director for the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, was sitting in his Faubourg Marigny house one spring morning, drinking fresh-brewed New Orleans chicory coffee and worrying about the oil spill.

He and music producer Bill Lynn had just watched oil executives blame one another for the Deepwater Horizon rig disaster, and Jaffe, who comes from a long line of jazz musicians, was sick of it. He glanced over at a glum Lynn, and as if by instinct, they started riffing on a standard New Orleans tune, "It Ain't My Fault."

"We both started singing it, out of frustration," Jaffe said. "It was as if we had been rehearsing for that moment our whole lives."

Jaffe texted rapper [Mos Def](#), musician Trombone Shorty and the rest of his band. By that evening, the group was together in the studio, recording a [version of the song](#) that would eventually be sold on iTunes, performed in concerts and remixed in clubs around the country, with the catchy lines: "Mama ya don't say, uh/Oil and water don't mix/petrilio ain't good for no fish."

Music is everywhere on the streets of New Orleans, but these days many of the tunes in the city's vibrant jazz scene focus on the oil spill. Everyone from solo street performers to famous vocalists seems to be writing new songs about the spill or repurposing old standards to thrash out their feelings about the disaster.

"We wake up every day frustrated and angry with this, and it's the only way that we know how to channel our energy," said Jaffe, whose father, Allan, made the Preservation Hall Jazz Band into a local institution.

Musicians in New Orleans have often used music to talk about local events.

The Robert Charles Riots in 1900, triggered by a manhunt after an African American laborer shot a white police officer, spawned a popular ballad. After the Saints won the [Super Bowl](#) in February, radio stations set up websites to feature all the new original songs. And in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many artists wrote new lyrics for old tunes, including "Drunken Angel" and [Randy Newman's](#) "Louisiana 1927," about a flood that drowned much of Mississippi, Arkansas and Louisiana, said Alex Rawls, editor of Offbeat magazine.

"So many people were completely displaced," Rawls said, and "the songs were to some degree an expression of affection for place."

But the songs in the aftermath of the BP oil spill seem to come more from anger.

Jacob Fisler, a street performer who can be found on the dimly lit corner of Orleans and Royal streets in the French Quarter, mocks the government to the tune of "Candy Man" from "Willy Wonka and The Chocolate Factory."

"Who can take a sunrise/Sprinkle it with s**. Put it in the ocean/Poison all the fish? The government can," he sings, strumming his guitar with a wry expression on his face.

"I'm getting frustrated with this response. Five years ago, they were so inept with Katrina," said Fisler, who wears a tattered cowboy hat. "Nothing has changed, it's just gotten worse."

Jazz singer John Boutte and his writing partners wrote the song "Nobody Knows Nothin' " in a minor key to give it a darker feel. The song begins: "And then one day we were fishing for some food, and up from the gulf came a bubblin goo."

Boutte, who says his family has lived in New Orleans since the city was founded, gets increasingly angry when he thinks about fishing with his father decades ago, and about how a way of life on the Gulf of Mexico is gone. He wanted to get people to think more about BP and the spill, without bringing them down.

"I'm not preaching to anybody," he said. "But it's like a big old gumbo pie, baby, there's a whole lot of people that are culpable."

Boutte performed the song under the bright red and blue lights of a packed Frenchman Street club on a recent Saturday night, exhorting the audience to join him in the chorus refrain, "nobody knows nothin'," which they did with hoots and cheers.

"It's truth and honesty, when we've got nothing but dishonesty," said Michael Hauck, who was in the audience and asked Boutte to autograph a printout of the song. Hearing songs about his city "is how I know I'm home," added Hauck.

Musicians in New Orleans write about tragedy much like folk musicians in Mexico sing narcocarridos about drug cartels — to tell a story about events, said Joel Dinerstein, director of American Studies at Tulane University.

"People learn things about current events on the streets through songs, in the same way that you would gossip or talk around town," he said.

Often, the songs interpret events in a way that resonates with the audience, he said. After the Titanic sank, for example, musicians wrote a ballad about a black man who escaped and was hailed a hero — a kind of revenge ballad, written because African Americans weren't allowed on the Titanic.

"When there are these cataclysmic events, people have to tell the stories that they have been through to themselves and others," said Jason Berry, a New Orleans filmmaker and author of "Up From the Cradle of Jazz: New Orleans Music since World War II."

Some will no doubt write books about the crisis, he said. Others are channeling their feelings through the visual arts: One artist in New Orleans has created an installation of hundreds of oil barrels on a lawn to show the magnitude of the spill.

But music has a way of bringing people together in one place to commiserate.

"We'll play the song in concert, most of the people in the audience are familiar with the song, and everybody joins," said Jaffe.

Chip Wilson, who performs a song called "You'll Get Through It" as part of the band Wilson & Moore, said he's been singing the song in the days since the spill because the audience seems to feel empowered by it.

"When something big happens, we want to swing together," he said.

Wilson & Moore were performing their anthem on a recent Sunday afternoon at the Old Point Bar in the Algiers neighborhood, which is separated from the French Quarter by the Mississippi River.

Janell Plaisance, an ultrasound technician sitting in the back of the room with some friends, had requested the song. She said she relates to it as someone who lived through Katrina, and is now watching the oil spill devastate her community.

"It's about what we're going through," she said, swaying to the music with a Bud Light in her hand. "It hits home."

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