



His jazz roots keep growing

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By Rita Charleston

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While some may have been born with a silver spoon in their mouth, Ben Jaffe, son of Preservation Hall Jazz Band founders Allan and Sandra Jaffe, was born with music in his heart.

His parents are Pennsylvania natives. Allan Jaffe was from Pottsville and graduated from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, where he played tuba in the band. Sandra Jaffe was from Wynnefield and graduated from Harcum Junior College.

The couple left for New Orleans in the 1960s and went on to convert a small gallery, originally built as a private residence in 1750, into a concert hall where local retired and aging musicians could play.

Thanks to the Jaffes' hard work and vision, and their belief that New Orleans jazz should not disappear, Preservation Hall opened its doors in 1963. Today, more than four decades later, the hall is still going strong.

Their son Ben Jaffe is now the creative director and tuba player for the band. Born in 1971 in New Orleans, Jaffe was raised in the heart of the French Quarter, he said, and its culture, along with the music and the memories he acquired over the years, just could not be forgotten.

"Growing up how and where I did, I always knew this music was something I wanted to be a part of, although there was never a defining moment where I woke up one day with a lightbulb over my head," said Jaffe, who will be appearing with the band in Creole Christmas on Dec. 12 at the Zellerbach Theater of the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts.

"It's all just part of who we are, and who I am, so it all sort of evolved, and here I am today," he said. "Growing up in there meant there was music everywhere. The French Quarter is one of those cities where there's music twenty-four hours a day, and you can't help but become part of it."

When he was 7, Jaffe began playing bass in his school's band. After hours spent with his parents at the Hall, the youngster listened to - and got to know - the reigning royalty of jazz, including Emma Barrett, William and Percy Humphrey, and dozens of others.

After graduation from Oberlin College in 1993, the young Jaffe flew out to join the Preservation Hall Jazz Band as bassist on a world tour. Gradually, he assumed his late father's responsibilities as director of Preservation Hall while continuing as a full-time band member and teaching as an adjunct professor at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, his high school alma mater.

While there's a great deal of history and tradition in New Orleans jazz, Jaffe said he's determined to make sure it doesn't fade.

"We are focused on continuing and perpetuating the traditions that were taught to us by our ancestors," he explained. "One of our main missions is to keep the tradition alive so that we can pass it on to other generations who can fill our shoes when the time comes.

"Everything we pursue is in the spirit of New Orleans and the spirit of joy. The music we play is truly joyous and uplifting. It is the kind of music people turn to at some point of their weakest moments for strength."

As for Jaffe, he acknowledged that his happiest moment is being onstage and looking out at the audience smiling and enjoying the music.

"We play all over the world, from Thailand to Korea to Paris and so on. And since there are no language barriers with music, it seems to touch everyone," he said. "That's what New Orleans music means to me, and what we want to convey to others. And that's what I most enjoy."