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Lenny Kravitz, Mos Def and the Preservation Hall Jazz Band remake 'It Ain't My Fault' as Gulf Aid fundraiser

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[Keith Spera, The Times-Picayune](#)



Early on May 12, Preservation Hall Jazz Band creative director Ben Jaffe was still fuming about the previous day's U.S. Senate hearings on the Deepwater Horizon oil spill disaster.

The spectacle of BP, Transocean and Halliburton executives shucking and ducking responsibility warranted a response, Jaffe decided.

A certain New Orleans rhythm & blues classic sprang to mind: "It Ain't My Fault."

Written by legendary New Orleans arranger Wardell Quezergue and drummer Smokey Johnson in 1964, "It Ain't My Fault" is now a Mardi Gras and brass band standard.

Less than 24 hours after the idea first struck Jaffe, a new version of "It Ain't My Fault" featuring Lenny Kravitz, Mos Def, Troy "Trombone Shorty" Andrews, actor Tim Robbins and the [Preservation Hall Jazz Band](#) had been recorded and mixed.

Jaffe hoped to release the song immediately on [iTunes](#) to benefit the nonprofit Gulf Relief Foundation, created to promote coastal restoration and assist families affected by the spill.

But creative processes often move more quickly than legal processes. Weeks later, the various parties involved still were securing necessary clearances and lobbying iTunes to waive its percentage of sales. Meanwhile, a video of the late-night recording session at Preservation Hall circulated online.

Barring another delay, "It Ain't My Fault" should be available via iTunes on Tuesday, June 15. Its existence is a testament to the ability of technology to facilitate creativity — and the musical possibilities available at any given moment in New Orleans.

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The Gulf Aid initiative was fast-tracked from the get-go.

WWOZ-FM general manager David Freedman, SDT Waste and Disposal founder Sidney D. Torres IV and businessman Joseph Jaeger Jr. launched the Gulf Relief Foundation anticipating that outside help would be slow in coming.

“After Katrina, we realized we couldn’t sit around waiting for somebody else to do something,” Freedman said. “We don’t do that any more. We got empowered by Katrina. When our culture and way of life is threatened, we’ve got to stand up for it.”

Barry Kern, president of Kern Studios, offered the company’s Mardi Gras World River City Plaza complex along the east bank of the Mississippi River for a benefit concert.

In eight days, Voodoo Experience and Essence Music Festival producer Stephen Rehage and his staff organized the May 16 Gulf Aid show with Kravitz, John Legend, Ani DiFranco and scores of Louisiana artists. Most musicians and staffers donated their time. Ticket and concession sales, sponsorships and donations raised \$300,000.

Now that he has sold his apartment in New York City, Kravitz’s only residence in the United States is the ancient French Quarter cottage he’s owned since the mid-’90s. (He also spends time at a home and studio in the Bahamas.)

Conveniently enough, he and his band had planned to spend the week before Gulf Aid rehearsing at Mardi Gras World. When Rehage and Torres asked him to headline Gulf Aid, “one conversation and it was done,” Kravitz said backstage. “There wasn’t any back-and-forth. I said, ‘I’m coming.’”

In the days before the concert, Kravitz interviewed fishers in St. Bernard Parish, documenting the spill’s human toll on the fishing and oyster industries.

“I care about my environment deeply, and I care about this city,” he said. “And here they are coming together ... again. It’s a hard time down here.”

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The Preservation Hall Jazz Band’s set at Gulf Aid kicked off with the new “It Ain’t My Fault” and special guest Mos Def.

At first glance, the Brooklyn-born MC and actor, who recently took up residence in New Orleans, might seem like an unlikely Preservation Hall collaborator, but Jaffe is a big fan.

“He’s the 21st-century Louis Armstrong, as far as I’m concerned,” Jaffe said.

Jaffe knows Mos Def’s DJ; their fathers were friends. On May 12, Jaffe texted Mos Def with the idea of re-recording “It Ain’t My Fault.”

Minutes later, the rapper responded with an opening lyric: “Oil and water don’t mix/petroleo is not a grease to blacken my fish.”

“He understood immediately what this project was,” Jaffe said.

That afternoon, Jaffe escorted Mos Def on a tour of street art by famed British graffiti artist Banksy. Later, Jaffe, Mos Def and Rehage dined at Crescent City Steaks on North Broad Street.

With the restaurant’s jukebox turned down, Mos Def listened to an original ’64 vinyl copy of “It Ain’t My Fault” on a portable record player supplied by Jaffe. He was familiar with the ’90s remake by New Orleans rappers Silkk the Shocker and Mystikal, “but when he heard the original version, he was like, ‘That’s it,’ ” Jaffe said.

With Smokey Johnson’s stuttering rhythm imprinted on his brain, Mos Def quickly completed new lyrics. Hoping to sustain their creative momentum, they planned to record the new song later that night at Preservation Hall after it closed to the public.

Around midnight, Jaffe and Mos Def convened with Preservation Hall drummer Joe Lastie, trombonist Freddie Lonzo, clarinetist Charlie Gabriel and saxophonist/singer Clint Maedgen.

A call was placed to Kravitz. He soon arrived with Torres, his good friend and former personal assistant.

“I didn’t know about it until an hour before,” Kravitz said of the recording session. “It was like 1 in the morning. I was running around working, and I heard that Mos was going down there, that he had written these great verses for ‘It Ain’t My Fault.’ ”

Kravitz “walked in and was so cool about everything,” Jaffe said. “He’s like, ‘Hey, man, what do you guys want me to do?’ ‘It would be great if you played guitar.’ He sat down and came up with a riff.”

They also contacted Troy “Trombone Shorty” Andrews, an alumnus of Kravitz’s horn section. Andrews happened to be at the Candlelight Lounge in Treme with Tim Robbins.

Andrews “comes walking down the street with his trombone case,” Kravitz recalled. “We all just kind of came together.”

Kravitz played guitar through an amplifier once used by Preservation Hall legend Sweet Emma Barrett. Andrews added his trombone to the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. Robbins and Torres served as backing vocalists.

At one point, Mos Def deployed a maroon megaphone favored by Sweet Emma — the same megaphone My Morning Jacket frontman Jim James borrowed during his recent Jazz Fest appearances with Preservation Hall.

In five takes, they were done.

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Their work complete, an impromptu jam session developed with Kravitz on drums and Andrews on piano.

“I wasn’t paying attention at first,” Jaffe said. “Then (Kravitz) starts getting into it. Next thing I know, Joe Lastie pulls out a bass drum and starts playing with him. It starts getting more serious: ‘OK, this isn’t just for fun any more ... we’re playing now.’”

Jaffe retrieved his tuba, Maedgen unpacked his sax, and they embarked on an extended gospel vamp. Mos Def joined in on tambourine.

“It was beautiful, because it was something we did just for us in a space that means a lot to this city,” Jaffe said. Preservation Hall “is our church; it’s sacred to us. To have these people playing church music in our church was a huge compliment.

“It reminded us of the importance of what we’re doing and why we celebrate this music. This is how we mourn, how we celebrate, how we get attention.”

The jam session “was big fun,” Kravitz said. “That’s what’s great about this city. Music can happen easily, quickly.”

Mos Def and Robbins hung at the hall until 5 a.m. Four hours later, the Preservation Hall crew had finished the first mix of the new “It Ain’t My Fault.”

Weeks later, with oil still belching into the Gulf of Mexico, the forecast for south Louisiana’s ecosystem and economy is dire. Jaffe knows that whatever money “It Ain’t My Fault” raises is desperately needed.

“You feel helpless. What can any of us really do as individuals? To play a song that means something, and to know that it’s going to get out to people and make a difference, is the most empowering thing that the music community can do.

“That’s what’s blowing my mind about this. We haven’t seen how big our voice is yet.”