

FESTIVAL FUN IN THE BIG EASY: Satchmo Summerfest, Essence Festival keep the good times rolling in New Orleans

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When people think about New Orleans, Mardi Gras comes to mind, a time of parades and intense partying in the streets. Or there's the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, two weekends of top musicians at the Louisiana Fairgrounds in late April. In recent years, the Essence Festival has brought even more folks to New Orleans. But the city has developed into a major year-round destination, with some of the best restaurants in the world and live music every night of the week. There's nothing like the rich cultural legacy and sense of history that literally wafts through the air of this mystical, magical city.

I was lucky enough to be in The Big Easy twice within the course of a month to witness two of the city's Big Four festivals. From August 4th through 7th, I attended the fifth annual Satchmo Summerfest, named in honor of pioneering jazz icon **Louis Armstrong**. This free, four-day celebration includes seminars about all aspects of the trumpet king's life, live outdoor musical performances, a gala concert, a club crawl on Frenchman Street, a jazz mass, and a dozen restaurants offering "Sizzling Satchmo" specials. Thanks to www.NewOrleansOnline.com, I joined a group of journalists on a fantastic voyage through the Summerfest's offerings as well as numerous other New Orleans delights.

We began our sojourn with dinner at the well-known Palace Cafe on Canal Street before attending a private screening of the new documentary *Make It Funky!*, directed by New Orleans native **Michael Murphy**. Already screened at international film festivals, the film follows the political, social, and cultural development of the music of New Orleans and its impact on rock'n'roll, jazz, and R&B. The film features interviews, archival footage, and live concert performances by a range of home-grown artists, including **the Neville Brothers**, "Lady Marmalade" songwriter and pianist **Allen Toussaint**, veteran session drummer **Earl Palmer**, pianist **Dr. John**, trumpeters **Irvin Mayfield** and **Kermit Ruffins**, **the Funky Meters**, **the Dirty Dozen Brass Band**, and many others. Also featured are **Bonnie Raitt** and **Rolling Stone Keith Richards**--both huge fans of New Orleans music.

Make It Funky! will make it to theaters in New York and Los Angeles in September, and will premiere at the New Orleans Film Festival in October. More cities could get the film later in the year, and it is definitely worth checking out. While cities like Chicago and Kansas City, Missouri, lay claim to a good part of Jazz history, New Orleans is arguably the birthplace of America's only truly indigenous music form and the film is a great crash course in why.

Thursday night in New Orleans after the screening seemed like a non-stop party! We sampled the happenings in the Carrollton neighborhood at Mid City Lanes Rock N Bowl (www.rockandbowl.com, voted best dance club), where there were only three active lanes of bowling but a packed dancefloor for the rollicking zydeco night! At Carrollton's

legendary Maple Leaf Bar (www.mapleleafbar.com), the **Johnny Vidacovich** Trio jammed with searing blues guitarist **Anders Osborne** and original Meters bassist **George Porter, Jr.**, and at another legendary joint in the Bywater district, Vaughn's Lounge, beloved trumpeter **Kermit Ruffins** was holding it down with his **Barbeque Swingers**, offering brass band arrangements of traditional New Orleans tunes, Louis Armstrong nuggets, contemporary hip-hop hits, and **Sly Stone** covers. And in the spirit of what the locals call *lagniappe* (lon-YAHP, or "something extra") the red beans & rice handed out after midnight was free!

Friday found our group exploring the history of the Mardi Gras Indians at the Backstreet Cultural Museum, checking out French Quarter music shops, and sampling po'boy sandwiches at Johnny's Po-Boys. After dinner at the famed Besh Steakhouse in Harrah's Casino, we checked out a performance by entertainer **Earl Turner**. You might not know his name, but this brother -- who performed at Harrah's in Las Vegas for seven years before being made the star attraction and namesake of the casino's state-of-the-art Earl Turner Theater -- really knows how to put on a show. By the end of the night, he had performed rock, pop, country, R&B, and blues, told jokes, and made two costume changes. Folks from 18 to 85, of all colors and creeds, wound up laughing, dancing, and singing along.

Afterward, we proceeded to Frenchman Street, located in the bohemian Faubourg Marigny district below the French Quarter to witness the true start of the Satchmo Fest. While there are music clubs on Bourbon Street, this is where much of the New Orleans music scene can be found. In honor of the festival, the street was closed off so visitors could wander among several clubs, sampling music at Cafe Brasil, the Blue Nile, the Spotted Cat, and finally Snug Harbor, where New Orleans jazz educator and patriarch **Ellis Marsalis** was holding it down on the piano with his trio. We partied on the Blue Nile balcony with local hero **Trombone Shorty** and his crew within arm's reach, and watched sets by **Delfeayo Marsalis** (another of Ellis's jazzier sons) and onetime Armstrong disciple **Nicholas Payton**, among others.

Saturday and Sunday were the full-on outdoor festival days for the Satchmo Summerfest, with four stages of music, including Dixieland combos, brass bands (some made up of all women, all teenagers, or from other countries), jazz singers, banjo pickers, and more, all playing their hearts out in tribute to Louis Armstrong and the jazz he made famous around the world. The event was held on the grounds of the Old U.S. Mint, which actually printed up both Confederate and Union money during its long history, but which is now part of the Louisiana State Museum. Inside the gorgeous Federal-style building is an extensive collection of early New Orleans jazz memorabilia and historical artifacts, including letters, instruments, photographs, and the cornet Armstrong first learned to blow on. (Across the hall was a fascinating one-room display on the history of the cocktail, but I digress.) Some 60,000 people were estimated to have attended the festival.

After Saturday's dinner at African-American-owned Creole restaurant Olivier's in the Quarter, we dashed to the Mahalia Jackson Theater to see the SummerFest evening concert by the **New Orleans Jazz Orchestra** led by New Orleans cultural ambassador

Irvin Mayfield with a guest appearance by Ellis Marsalis. Mayfield, who is also part of Latin jazz band **Los Hombres Calientes** with **Bill Summers**, conducted several pieces, including a gorgeous piece commissioned last year titled "Beats," which built measure upon measure like a Ravel's "Bolero" for the New World before breaking into a serious Afro-Cuban frenzy. Perfection. We partied into the wee hours by checking out the music at local clubs Donna's, The Funky Butt, and the legendary Tipitina's.

We wrapped up the weekend in true New Orleans style. After attending Sunday morning's special jazz mass at the historic St. Augustine church in the Tremé district, which was settled over 200 years ago by free people of color, the entire congregation followed three different brass bands down Rampart Street in our own Second Line Parade through Louis Armstrong Park. There we paused in Congo Square, hallowed ground in New Orleans as the only place in the city that blacks were allowed to gather during slavery times, before marching and dancing (in the hot sun) back to the U.S. Mint at the edge of the French Quarter. Satchmo would have loved it! I certainly did.



Classic photo of a young Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong and his horn

For more on the Satchmo Summerfest or any New Orleans tourism information, log onto www.NewOrleansOnline.com, the city's official Internet tourism portal.

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With thousands upon thousands of visitors turning out over July 4th weekend every year, New Orleans is proud to count the successful Essence Music Festival among its Big

Four festivals (the others are the French Quarter Festival and the Jazz & Heritage Festival). The all-star musical celebration that also serves as a Party With A Purpose, clustered around the Louisiana Superdome and the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, is all it's cracked up to be and more!

The Essence Festival is known for booking top acts year after year, so the caliber of talent available was no surprise. What I was impressed with was how smoothly the shows progressed, how orderly and friendly the crowds were, how plentiful and accessible the food and drinks were! If there was any down note, it was news of the July 1st passing of **Luther Vandross** on the opening night of the festival, something acknowledged by all of the performers throughout the weekend.

This year's Coca-Cola-sponsored Essence Festival featured performances by **Aretha Franklin, Alicia Keys, John Legend, Destiny's Child, the Black Eyed Peas, Kem, Alicia Keys, Teena Marie, Fantasia** and others on the main stage, with dozens more-- including faves **Mint Condition, Regina Belle, and Gordon Chambers** -- playing the smaller Super Lounges. It was difficult to get to see everything and everyone on the schedule, but the whole joyful experience was capped off nicely by the last two acts on the main stage on Sunday July 3rd. **Lionel Richie**, Grammy winning composer, singer, and onetime lead singer of the **Commodores**, turned it out with a high-energy trip through his numerous hits. Most gratifying to the Essence Fest crowd was his concentration on Commodore-era nuggets like "Zoom," "Easy," "Three Times A Lady," and the kicker, "Brick House," which had folks standing on their seats. I've never seen Richie -- who got criticized by some in the '80s for his string of syrupy but top-selling pop ballads -- give a bad show, and this time he cranked up the funk to searing levels.

Richie's stellar performance was the perfect lead-in for the Festival finale of **Frankie Beverly & Maze**, a group with a comparatively short recording output but with a popularity level that is off the charts, particularly in the South. And it is much-deserved -- Maze's signature sound of warm southern soul touched with funk and pop has created some indelible tunes, all of which Frankie and the gang faithfully reproduced: "Southern Girl," "Back In Stride Again," "Golden Time Of Day," and the thrilling "We Are One." After doing the Electric Slide with thousands upon thousands of fans in the aisles of the SuperDome with Frankie on stage, I can say that I truly had one of the best communal experiences to be had in public!

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