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FRINGE BEAT

KNOTS IN THE GRAIN

by Josef Woodard

MUSICAL RELIEF EFFORTS: Just as Time magazine's person of the year has sometimes gone to an influential evildoer, any reflection on the most impacting personality in American music in 2005 must settle on one name: Katrina. Her fury laid bare social and political inequities—not to mention dormant racism in America—while also focusing the world's attention on one of this planet's most soulful cities.

The deepest manifestation of New Orleans's soul is in the music—which is all of our music. Never mind those hot spots on the modern-day music power grid: L.A., Nashville, and N.Y.C., moving west to east. The real Mecca of American music was, is, and shall ever be the Crescent City, spawning ground of jazz, R&B, rock 'n' roll, and more indigenous Louisianan sounds. It deserves our love, thanks, and bucks.

Benefit musical efforts have been hitting the shelves in time for the holidays. The best of these albums manage to provide cold, hard economic succor while supplying sampler-style education in New Orleans's gumbo-style musical identity. Plus, they contain rocking, soul-stirring music for its own sake, and a pleasant, sexy shock of recognition: This is music that provides the all-important knots in the American grain.

Nonesuch Records, one of America's finest, has logically leapt to the cause, with the inspiring new compilation *Our New Orleans*, with fine liner notes by New Orleans resident and champion Richard Ford. It opens, fittingly, with the optimistic up note of "Yes We Can Can," by Allen Toussaint, New Orleans's legendary behind-the-scenes scene-shaper. Allegory bumps up against harsh realities in Irma Thomas's "Back Water Blues" ("there ain't no place for a poor woman to go ..."). Buckwheat Zydeco stretches out on "Cryin' in the Street," with searing lap steel lines; the Preservation Hall Jazz Band gives vintage coloration to "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans"; and honorary southerner Randy Newman (actually a Hollywood boy) sings his bittersweet, eerily prophetic "Louisiana 1927," a righteous finale.

The party-for-a-cause continues on *A Celebration of New Orleans Music* (Rounder). It fills the gaps of the Nonesuch package by including important figures like the mighty Aaron Neville, pianist James Booker, and the Dirty Dozen Brass Band, as well as New Orleans native Branford Marsalis (whose own Marsalis Music label is distributed by Rounder).

N.Y.C. BAYOU MAN: One of New Orleans's proudest sons, Wynton Marsalis, not only used his clout to nurture the relief effort, but also became an articulate N'Awlins talking head. Marsalis has been deeply plugged into Manhattan for many years, most recently having been the point-man behind the massive Jazz at Lincoln Center (actually at Columbus Circle now), celebrating its grand opening last year.

Memories and imprints of New Orleans are bred in Marsalis's bones, musically, on various spiritual levels. Christening the new three-venue Jazz at Lincoln Center compound last October, Marsalis led a New Orleans jazz parade from the organization's old home at Lincoln Center to the new address a few blocks away. Within weeks of Katrina's wrath, Marsalis had organized a benefit concert at the J@LC's Rose Theater, on September 17, for broadcast on PBS. Now comes the CD version, *Higher Ground, Hurricane Relief Benefit Concert* (Blue Note). Charitable virtue aside, the album is a live primer in why we all should miss New Orleans.

Marsalis rounded up an all-star cast for the concert, including the white-but-good likes of Diana Krall, James Taylor, and Norah Jones, who offers a cool, beautiful take on Randy Newman's "I Think It's Gonna Rain Today." We also get a cameo by tenor sax great Joe Lovano, whose "Blackwell's Message" pays tribute to late, great New Orleans-born drummer Ed Blackwell, who played with Ornette Coleman as well as more traditional corners of jazz and Louisianan music. The track features another vital New Orleans-ian native drummer, Idris Muhammad, who recently dazzled the Lobero crowd with Ahmad Jamal.

Art and Aaron Neville kick up the unofficial N'Awlins anthem, "Go to the Mardi Gras," always a good idea, whether literally or symbolically. (Got e? fringebeat@aol.com.)