

When the Levees Broke

The day after Hurricane Katrina tore through New Orleans, breaking levees and swamping eighty percent of the city in toxic flood waters, a cryptic announcement crackled over the only local radio station still in operation: "New Orleans as we know it has ended."

The horrific cyberpunk nightmare that would ensue in the coming days was still in its beginning stages, yet this statement—more obituary than observation—crystallized the fears of residents and lovers of the lost city alike. Fats Domino, who rode out the hurricane before being rescued by boat from the third floor of his flooded home, told the Washington Post that although he'd survived the storm, he was unsure about how he'd survive its aftermath. Like many evacuees, Domino honestly wonders whether his hometown can ever again be what it once was.

Allen Toussaint, reported to have been one of the more than 20,000 who took shelter in the city's overcrowded Superdome, eventually escaped via a pirated school bus whose driver was charging \$100 a person to take people to Baton Rouge. Now residing at a friend's house in New York City, he remains upbeat about the tragedy, calling it "an intermission" in the city's long and sordid history. He says he has every intention of returning, picking up the pieces and starting fresh.

Both Domino and Toussaint—like so many others—concur that they've lost everything. Yet even in its ruin, the essence of a city is its people and their strength to persevere; at the time of this writing both men are set to play a concert at Madison Square Garden along with Dave

Bartholomew, Clarence "Frogman" Henry and other Crescent City musical royalty, the proceeds of which will aid relief efforts.

But as the spirit of New Orleans lives on through its displaced natives, one has to wonder what will become of the magical place that birthed that spirit, a spirit that could have come from nowhere else.

Built on swamplands five feet below sea level and surrounded by water, New Orleans was gloriously flawed from the beginning, the freakishly beautiful cousin of other tidier, better-behaved American cities. More Caribbean than southern; more European than American, its three hundred-year old history is steeped in mysterious, often murky, extremes: sin and spiritualism, wild abandon and staunch tradition, abject poverty and over-the-top wealth.

Its music, like its culture, has always been bound up in the elemental; a greasy, swampy gumbo of jazz, R&B and rock 'n' roll that remains strangely sinister even in its innocence. Much of that music didn't come from relatively unscathed areas such as the French Quarter and the Garden District but from flood-stricken neighborhoods like Treme and the Ninth Ward, places whose futures hang perilously in question.

And that is the crux of this colossal loss; that the true soul of New Orleans went much deeper than its all-night bars and ancient architecture. In the quest to rebuild a city whose beauty and wickedness are two sides of the same coin, the fear that something crucial will be lost in the coming transition remains a very real one. New Orleans has survived wars, plagues and countless storms prior to Katrina, now the question is: Can it survive its own rebirth?

