



Everything New Orleans

'American Routes' tracks Louisiana music, culture at K+5

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By **Dave Walker, The Times-Picayune**

If I could pick one **K+5 anniversary** update I'd want everybody to see, they'd have to use their ears.



This week's episode of New Orleans-based, public-radio, musical travelogue "American Routes" is one of a dozen post-Katrina dispatches to the nation the show has done over the past five years, and it brims with hope. **"American Routes: After the Storm XII"** airs at 6 p.m. Sunday (August 29) on **WWNO FM-89.9**.

The episode doesn't ignore our problems -- there's a lovely field trip to the bayou with Tab Benoit that perfectly frames the threatened-wetlands issue, for example -- but its overall impact is profoundly upbeat.

"The balance we were trying to strike was certainly remembering and memorializing, but at the same time being hopeful and looking forward," producer-host Nick Spitzer said. "My basic take is that New Orleans is a better city than it was, partly because people have been forced to let down some of the barriers between neighborhoods, race and class, and unite, and that many of the people who are here are people who genuinely want to be here, whether they're long-term natives or new-arrivers.

"That doesn't mean we wouldn't want anybody to come back who wants to come back, and (they) shouldn't be stopped from coming back. I think it's important to bring everybody home who possibly can make it.



"But I think the mood of the city has been strong despite the splotch of the oil spill. The ingredients of the recovery – a better school system, better governance, and obviously the Super Bowl didn't hurt – have come together. I think volunteerism and lateral social and cultural relationships have been powerful here. A lot of people

initially dismissed that stuff, but I think the reality and the metaphor of the social aid and pleasure clubs has been somewhat write large, in suburban areas and Uptown and in places away from those clubs, where people have done everything they can. Who would've thought of a Women of the Storm before this time?

"I think we took the view of, 'We've made some real steps forward and we should celebrate them even as we remember our difficulties.' Of course, we've always tried to (trade) in cultural and aesthetic (topics), believing that the cultural piece is at the center of anybody's need or desire to return and help build this recovery."

Segments in the show include (in addition Benoit) interviews with James Carville, Derrick Tabb, Irma Thomas, Bruce "Sunpie" Barnes and "Treme" writers Eric Overmyer and Lolis Eric Elie, among others. The music ranges from Mahalia Jackson to Irvin Mayfield with the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra, to Joe Liggins and the Honey Drippers to Allen Toussaint to Wardell Quezergue.

All woven into a typically succinct-and-swinging whole.

"Do we still have crime?" Spitzer said. "Definitely. Do we still have a terrible gap between rich and poor? No question. Do we still have a long way to go (in preserving) our music and cultural economy? We do. We've come down the road with a lot of values that we have that a lot of cities don't have that relate to the kinds of artists here, the attraction of the way of life here, not just the quality of life.

"I wanted to carry forward that upbeat message and have it reach the locals, and also have the nation see that we're not just here mourning, and that we're not just waiting for a federal or state bailout, and that we actually did a lot our ourselves -- with the help of many people on the outside.

"To me, New Orleans is a symbol for what the whole country needs. The country's in a recession into what may be 10 years of deflation, and people have to ask themselves, 'What is life for?' If Washington and Wall Street can't provide a (foundation) that maybe used to exist in people's minds, now's the time to focus on community and culture and what we need to really live or to lead decent lives.

"We have an advantage in that, because we have received all this continuity of culture. That, to me, is the prevailing and framing mood for this

program.”

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