

Rebirth Brass Band

Breathing new life into an old soul



REBIRTH BRASS BAND



Written by
Caroline Eubanks



IF YOU WALK IN NEW ORLEANS, from cemeteries to street corners you hear the signature sound of the city. It's influenced by past generations of musicians who melded West African folk music and traditional European military tunes, adding in modern funk and hip-hop sounds. The steady beat of the bass drum is like a pulse. It's the brass band, a musical style unique to the city and ever-present in second-line parades and at jazz funerals.

One of the genre's most renowned is the Rebirth Brass Band, which won the 2012 Grammy Award for Best Regional Roots Music Album and will headline Thomasville's Due South festival in April in its first appearance in the city. Brothers Phil and Keith Frazier, along with their friend Kermit Ruffins, a famed trumpeter, founded Rebirth in 1983.

"My brother, Phillip, he was the leader of the marching band [at] Joseph S. Clark Sr. High School," says drummer Keith Frazier. "A lady who was the band booster parent [had a group] coming to New Orleans for a conference. They wanted to give them a piece of New Orleans culture, show them how we do things in New Orleans, like Mardi Gras and Jazz Fest."

Phillip, the tuba player, got a group of guys together to perform for the conference,





“I like BB King. I like the blues. Wynton Marsalis, in terms of jazz. I like a lot of New Orleans brass bands, like Dirty Dozen [Brass Band]. Those were the bands that were before us. We looked up to those guys.” — Keith Frazier

The Rebirth players have been to Europe and Japan, as well as in 1994 to Cuba, where they served as sorts of musical ambassadors for the music of New Orleans and, in turn, learned about that nation's musical traditions.

but because the venue was serving alcohol and the boys were still in high school, they weren't allowed to play.

"Philip decided that 'Hey, man, since we can't play, let's go down to the French Quarter on Bourbon Street and play for tips,'" Keith says. "So all the guys got together and they went down. They played for tips, and they liked the idea of being able to play the instruments and play some New Orleans jazz. They said, 'Hey, let's continue to do this every day after school.' And that's pretty much how the band was started, as a high school project."

This "high school project" has continued for more than 35 years, bringing the sound of New Orleans to venues all over the world. But the band wasn't always known as the Rebirth Brass Band.

"At the time the band didn't have a name," Keith says. "There was no name at all. And then one summer afternoon, this guy by the

name of Bobby Leonard, he saw the guys in the French Quarter playing for tips. He said, 'Why don't you guys come down and play for my organization?' His organization was called Rebirth. It was a youth organization to keep kids off the streets during the summer and give them something recreational to do."

Leonard suggested the name of the organization as the name for the band.

"Phillip said, 'I think that's a great name.'" Keith continues. "And that's how the band got the name."

As one might expect, the players get inspiration from the greats who came before them, including several artists from New Orleans.

"I like BB King. I like the blues," Keith says. "Wynton Marsalis, in terms of jazz. I like a lot of New Orleans brass bands, like Dirty Dozen [Brass Band]. Those were the bands that were before us. We looked up to those guys. Different vocalists that we would hear in and around New Orleans. And just different artists, like R&B. We used to listen to Frankie Beverly. We used to listen to a lot of Louis Armstrong."





The band has played all over New Orleans, including in a years-long residency at the 50-year-old Maple Leaf Bar in the Leonidas neighborhood. Rebirth now performs at the Rabbit Hole in Central City every Tuesday night and has appeared several times at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival.

“Tipitina’s was one of the first gigs we had as the Rebirth Brass Band. We’ve played the Hollingsworth, House of Blues and just about everything in the city of New Orleans,” Keith says. “Some of those venues have now closed, but we probably played all of them.”

The band’s travels have also taken it across the States and to foreign destinations.

“We’ve played pretty much everywhere in the United States, from East Coast to West Coast, north, south. Probably one of our favorite places to play is Seattle. We’ve played New York City, at the Blue Note, been all over Florida, the Florida Keys. We’ve played in California quite a bit—San Francisco, at the Great American. Just about everywhere.”

The Rebirth players have been to Europe and Japan, as well as in 1994 to Cuba, where they served as sorts of musical ambassadors for the music of New Orleans and, in turn, learned about that nation’s musical traditions.

“It was kind of like a research project, to study Cuban music,” Keith says. “So we had to get a license from the United States government.

We did a State Department tour of West Africa. We went to Senegal, Benin, Togo. We even went to Egypt.”

But perhaps one of the band’s most significant memories, Keith says, is of a little trip its members took to Washington, D.C.

“We played when President Obama was in the White House. He would do this yearly thing for jazz awareness. When we played, Aretha Franklin was there, Al Jarreau, who are both now deceased. So that was a really great honor, looking back on it. It was a great honor just to be invited to play at the White House.”

REBIRTH BRASS BAND
rebirthbrassband.com