

KANAVAL: Haitian Rhythms & the Music of New Orleans

Hour One

Hosted by Haitian-American and New Orleans-based artist and musician, Leyla McCalla, a founding member of Our Native Daughters & alumna of the GRAMMY award-winning Carolina Chocolate Drops.

[Boukman Ekspereyans - "K M Pa Sote"]

This is Kanaval: Haitian Rhythms and the Music of New Orleans.

I'm your host, Leyla McCalla. In this hour, we go deep into the music of Haiti... including the vodou cosmology at its heart.

ELIZABETH MCALLISTER: Vodou affects daily life and, even if you're sitting there shelling peas, you can be singing to the spirits.

The artists and musicians who use their platform to inspire and empower the people.

MARYSE DEJEAN: Music in Haiti is really the weapon for revolution. If you are on the ground in Haiti, I think that you are constantly resisting.

RICHARD MORSE: Haitians are looking for that parable that's going to help them get through the smoke, and help them get through the night.

And the sounds and rhythms that connect Haiti and New Orleans, the living and the dead, the present with the past.

BEN JAFFE: The first thing that I hear going into the airport is a banjo, and it sounds like the banjo playing that I grew up with as a kid in New Orleans....

All that coming up next in this hour of Kanaval: Haitian Rhythms and the Music of New Orleans.

WXPB Kanaval Documentary
Hour 2 Final

Stay with us.

SEGMENT A

[Rebirth Brass Band - "Feel Like Funkin' It Up (Live Street Mix)"]

Nearly every Sunday in New Orleans —when there’s not a pandemic — a brass band leads hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people in a procession through the city’s streets.

It’s called a second line parade because the musicians lead the way for the “second line” — the crowd that’s following right behind.

A wall of dancers following a wall of sound. A party in motion, where the boundaries between performer and participant blur. The rhythm of the music summons the spirits of the ancestors.

There’s nothing more New Orleans than this sacred weekly ritual.

Even if you’ve never set foot in the Crescent City, you know our music, our parties, our parades. You know about the beads, gumbo, and the French Quarter.

But what’s behind all these traditions? Why is the cultural heart of the city the way it is?

Why are we the way we are?

This is the sound of dancers, drummers, and other members of the Krewe Du Kanaval. An organization dedicated to nurturing the connections between New Orleans and Haiti.

BEN JAFFE: Because of Krewe du Kanaval, there is now a conversation that is taking place in our city.

This is Ben Jaffe — with his huge curly hair and big round glasses, he’s one of the most recognizable people in the city. Ben is the creative director of the legendary Preservation Hall Jazz Band.

BEN JAFFE: We're a city that struggles with its identity, you know. And it's not a conversation piece because it's painful for a lot of people. It's painful for me to even think

about. You know, I was born here, but I'm not from here. You know what I mean? Like, I'm not like fifth or sixth, eighth generation New Orleanean. I'm like first-generation. My parents are from Philadelphia.

The “pain” Ben’s talking about goes deep. All the way back to when two French colonies thrived just a thousand miles away from each other: New Orleans and Saint Domingue — what we now call Haiti.

As we’ve said, those connections are alive in the DNA of New Orleans. On the surface, too.

WIN BUTLER: Other than the architecture and the food and the music, other than that, it's pretty subtle.

That’s Win Butler. He’s the frontman of the rock band Arcade Fire. He lives in New Orleans with his Haitian-Canadian wife, Regine Chassagne.

[WWOZ - 9th Ward Hunters Mardi Gras]

Win and Regine said a big reason they settled in New Orleans was to dig deeper into the cultural life the place shares with Haiti.

WIN BUTLER: It looks the same. Same way of cooking, same Mardi Gras, same religious underpinning, like Catholicism mixed with African religion and vodou. And it's like there's a kind of tourist version of it, but then it's actually just in the society as well. I mean, particularly this time of year, this whole month leading up to Mardi Gras, you just hear it in the streets. You hear it at nighttime, you hear the language, you hear the Mardi Gras Indians singing. It's kind of all around you.

RÉGINE CHASSAGNE: A spiritual connection, also.

Regine and Win became fast friends with Ben from Preservation Hall through their mutual love of music and culture.

They decided to travel together to Haiti.

Win says it was Ben’s first time there.

WIN BUTLER: I remember when we first got to the central plateau there was a brass band that kind of played for us when we got there. And Ben's like, almost crying. It sounded like if

you got in a time machine and went to New Orleans pre swing, like pre jazz, New Orleans, and it's, it's pretty powerful.

The architecture, the food, and the people reminded Ben of home.

[Danny Barker - "Tishomingo Blues"]

BEN JAFFE: When we walked out of the plane and the air hit me, I began to cry and I didn't know where this was coming from. And we walk into the airport and the first thing that I hear going into the airport is a banjo...

BEN JAFFE: ...and it sounds like the banjo playing that I grew up with as a kid in New Orleans....

That experience was so potent that Win, Regine and Ben immediately started dreaming up a way to make these connections come alive back at home in New Orleans. So they co-founded Krewe du Kanaval in 2017.

RÉGINE CHASSAGNE: In New Orleans, and in Haiti, there are so many various groups that are working on this all the time.

Again, Regine Chassagne.

RÉGINE CHASSAGNE: Dance troupes, drummers, associations of this, associations of that cultural this, cultural that. So when I came to New Orleans, I would go to Mardi Gras and all these influences that I recognize in the city all year long. When I go to Mardi Gras, like the Main Street Mardi Gras, I don't see them.

Regine says she felt like the city could do more to acknowledge the Haitian part of its identity.

RÉGINE CHASSAGNE: And for me, it's just taking this opportunity that we have to - just like to push this forward so that all these groups and organizations that are saying the same thing for forever, get a highlight, and show the beautiful culture that everyone is proud of anyway.

The Krewe Du Kanaval celebrations feature street parades, parties, and concerts. Bands from Haiti perform alongside musicians from New Orleans. Their sounds effortlessly mix together.

It's a great party.

STEEVE VALCOURT: When we came the first time, everybody was like, so amazed to be here. And then every corner there is like, kids, you know, someone with a saxophone by himself in a corner. I'd be like, "Whoa." Because in Haiti it's the same thing - everything we do is with music.

This is Steeve Valcourt, the leader of Lakou Mizik, an up and coming band from Jacmel, Haiti composed of all-star players from that region.

The band's name combines two concepts:

***Lakou* are extended family compounds that developed after the Haitian Revolution. *Lakou* refers both to the physical design — a group of houses around a central courtyard — and also to the family group itself.**

And *mizik* is shorthand for *mizik rasin* — or Haitian roots music.

They first visited New Orleans in 2017 to play Krewe Du Kanaval. Steeve says in Haiti, music is everywhere.

STEEVE VALCOURT: You know when you do chores, when you plant, when you work the Earth, when you go to the mechanic, you'd be like, you know everything you do, you have a song that you mumble or something that helps you going. So it's like everything we do, it's with music.

So that's what amazed me when I get here, I was like, "Yes, on every corner there is music." So I felt like home.

That feeling is mutual.

A shared history cements that bond.

[Lavinia Williams Haitian Voodoo Dancers and Musicians – Congo]

ANGEL PARHAM: Migration from colonial San Domingue into New Orleans really did provide this infusion of African presence, African music, African dance, and it really solidified some of what was already here and then brought some new influences.

Angel Parham teaches sociology at Loyola University in New Orleans.

ANGEL PARHAM: In the rest of the United States, you didn't have the dancing and drumming traditions that you did in New Orleans, right? So, with this new influence, in 1809, it meant that the Anglo-Americans, again, could not stamp out that African influence as easily as they might've wanted to because now you've got this whole group coming in from colonial Saint Domingue, and many of those folks were Africans. You know, that is, they were born in Africa. So you also get that in the preservation of the very distinctive rhythms we have here in our second lines, for instance.

Angel says if you take a close listen to second line music and observe the intricate dance moves that go along with it, you begin to see the patterns of history.

[Rebirth Brass Band - Feel Like Funkin' It Up (Live Street Mix)]

ANGEL PARHAM: You're going to hear a lot of similarities in the underlying beat, and see some similarities, also, physically in the kind of dancing in the footwork. So those are, again, those are our layers that you see that are retained in the soundscape and the dance, and the architecture. And then also in race.

Those similar layers also bleed into the politics of the culture.

In New Orleans, Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs date back to the late 19th century. African-Americans created them out of necessity and fellowship. These clubs raise money for their members' needs — critical to the community when banks didn't lend to Black people. They're also cultural links to the ancestors in Africa and the Caribbean.

BRUCE BARNES: I'm a member of a social aid and pleasure club, which is a parading organization known as Black Men of Labor. And we, you know, parade through the streets of the city using traditional music and traditional dance styles.

Bruce Sunpie Barnes is a musician, park ranger, and writer based in New Orleans. Clubs like the Black Men of Labor organize and lead second line parades. They also facilitate social programs in their neighborhoods.

BRUCE BARNES: The appeal is to keep the tradition alive, first of all. The appeal is to, to understand and know how to connect directly with your ancestral spirits and your family members. It's a direct link. Can't get around it. And then to be able to pass on social messages to the people in the city that we love so much. To denounce violence, domestic violence, violence against children, women, gun violence, drug violence. All those things that'll expediate your ultimate demise.

Ben Jaffe told us the first time he went to Haiti's capital he thought he stumbled on a Social Aid and Pleasure Club parade.

BEN JAFFE: We were coming down the street and I noticed a band marching and they were wearing what we call in New Orleans "traditional black-and-white," which is black pants, white shirt and a black tie. In New Orleans, it also means a black cap, a black marching cap. And I noticed on the street, the entire street were funeral homes. And so I imagined that this band is there all day, and they, when there's a funeral, you know, the owner of that funeral home probably negotiates with the band something, and they come over and they perform a ceremony for the departed and do a procession, like we do in New Orleans.

Second lines and jazz funerals in New Orleans. Rara bands and bonnapye parades in Haiti.

Ben told us that on his visit to Haiti, the music landscape felt beyond familiar.

BEN JAFFE: You know, usually you go someplace, you visit someplace, and there's one thing that reminds you of home. It's not just a similarity, but it's a similarity to New Orleans fifty years ago, or a hundred years ago. That's what was blowing me away is somehow these valuable traditions are also carried on today with some awareness, but sometimes with no awareness that it's even a tradition. It's just part of who they are. It's just, this is how it's done. This is how it's been done. This is how we're going to keep doing it.

So what are we really talking about when we talk about these shared traditions? The shared soundscape? These connections?

To find out, we need to go to *Haiti*. We'll get back to New Orleans.

You're listening to Kanaval: Haitian Rhythms and the Music of New Orleans. I'm Leyla McCalla.

We'll be back in a minute. Stay with us.

END SEGMENT A

SEGMENT B

Welcome back to Kanaval: Haitian Rhythms and the Music of New Orleans. I'm Leyla McCalla.

[Société Soleil Levant - "Vye Gran"]

Rhythms create the foundation of Haitian music.

These rhythms developed in Haiti during the colonial era trace their roots to pre-middle-passage Africa, maroon communities, and the indigenous Taino culture.

There are more rhythms than any one person can know. But the underlying system that we can use to understand them is vodou.

ELIZABETH MCALISTER: Vodou is a Creolized and also a Christianized African-based religious system.

This is Liza McAlister. She teaches religion at Wesleyan University.

ELIZABETH MCALISTER: It has elements from the Spanish colonial Catholicism, as well as French Catholicism mixed with traditional Yoruba, religion, Congo, religion, the Fon religions of Dahomey, and other West African and central African religious traditions. And this is a tradition that grew in Haiti from slavery times to the present. And it's really a full cultural system. We in the U.S. sort of call it a religion because we compartmentalize things, but it's a philosophy and a healing system and a religious system as well.

LOGAN SCHUTTS: With Haitian Vodou you have enslaved Africans brought from Senegal, brought from the Gold Coast, which is now Ghana, from the Togo and Benin area, where Vodou comes from.

[Lakou Badjo - "Pie Aleman Batala Lemiso"]

This is New Orleans-based vodou drummer Logan Schutts.

LOGAN SCHUTTS: But it's all practiced by drumming, dancing, and singing - is what they have in common. Except that the drums themselves are very different from each area, the songs are very different, of course, the languages are very different. And so, all those people were represented in Haiti, and all those traditions needed to be respected and maintained and preserved. And that looks like now is that any one house of Vodou in Haiti has all these different nations inside of it, and each nation has a different set of drums that you would bring out for that part of the ceremony. And different songs and different - what they call Loa.

Haitians call their spirits Loa. Different sets of loa exist in each nation. So there are different rhythms associated with these spirits.

[Drummers of the Société Absolument Guinin - "Kokoplim"]

ELIZABETH MCALISTER: The ceremonies are absolutely beautiful.

Again, Liza McAlister.

ELIZABETH MCALISTER: Music is just one of the many components of the artistry in a vodou service. Usually there's drumming, although not always.

And it's the kind of three drum battery drumming that you also find in West Africa. And then a chorus of call and response singers, things over the drumming. And this is one of the ways that the gods or the spirits they're called Loa, or they're called angels are invoked. And so each spirit has many, many songs that are named after their name.

And during the course of a ceremony each spirit is sung to in the hopes that the spirit will come down and possess one of the dancers.

Vodouists believe that life continues into death. That souls slip slip into the sea and that families can summon them through music and ritual.

This understanding of death keeps families linked to their ancestors through song, dance, and belief.

[Mimerose Beaubrun - "Ogou O Wa De Zanj (Song for Ogou)"]

Ogun is one family of loa. A woman wrote this song while she was possessed — and her granddaughter recorded it.

ELIZABETH MCALISTER: The woman who sings the song is the lead one of the lead singers and a founding member of Boukman Ekspereyans, which is a band in Haiti that mixes traditional vodou musics with sort of the pop codes of rock and roll.

She wanted to show the listeners how vodou affects daily life and how, even if you're sitting there shelling peas, you can be singing to the spirits, uh, which is very common to find somebody in Haiti, just sort of sitting there and singing.

The singer Liza is talking about is Mimerose Beaubrun.

And she's singing a song, which her grandmother first sang while she was possessed by a spirit. Apparently the spirit came and possessed her grandmother and just began to sing the song. And the song says, *Ogun*, who's the spirit of war and iron and discipline.

*Ogun...roi des anges...*which means King of the angels. Um, those people say that they're going to do me in, those people are my enemies. What's going to happen to me? And *Ogun* responds and says, "Ah, that's a joke. That's a game. I'm here. I'm protecting you. The angels are around you. You don't have to worry."

[Boukman Ekspereyans -"Ogou O Wa Dè Zanj"]

Mimerose Beaubrun's band Boukman Ekspereyans is *legendary*. They formed in the late 1970s — in the middle of Papa Doc Duvalier's brutal regime — and became the voice of the people.

The band takes its name from Dutty Boukman — a vodou priest and a hero of the Haitian Revolution.

LOLO BEABURN: What he did was unify all slaves.

This is Theodore Lolo Beaubrun — Mimerose’s husband and bandmate. From the yard of his house in Jacmel, Haiti, he talked to us on the anniversary of the ceremony that is said to have unified the enslaved people to begin the Haitian revolution.

Dutty Boukman led that ceremony.

LOLO BEAUBRUN: He makes a speech to say that the god of the whites was blood, but the real god wants to deliver us from the condition we are in.

[Boukman Ekspereyans - “Nou Pap Sa Bliye”]

This revolutionary spirit inspired Lolo and Mimerose’s band.

Through music, Boukman Ekspereyans resists oppression and delivers hopeful messages to the Haitian people.

From the time they first took the stage in 1978, they were an instant hit.

PAUL BEAUBRUN: From what he told me, he said he saw Bob Marley at Madison Square Garden, and he could not believe it.

Lolo and Mimerose’s son Paul Beaubrun was just a boy when they were getting started, but he remembers growing up wanting badly to be in the band.

He says they made an instant impact because they created a brand new sound. They synthesized traditional Haitian music — *mizik rasin* — with electric sounds from farther north.

PAUL BEAUBRUN: You know, because everyone was just, it was just electric from the sound engineer, the lighting people, everybody was dancing to that music. And he's listening to the, you know, he's a big fan, so he's listening to the bassline and he's like, “Wow, you know, if he can do that with his music, we can do that with our music, too.” So that's the inspiration of creating a style of music that's Haitian, pure Haitian, but, you know, you have other styles of music around it.

CHICO BOYER: It's African deep inside from the soul. How will I say it? Only through Voudou, we could be connected.

Chico Boyer was a founding member and longtime bass player for Boukman. He lives in Brooklyn now.

CHICO: *Risin* music is based, is based on our culture, our African culture, deep African culture. Cause you know, we've been studying all these rhythms. We get to the Lakou in the countryside to learn from the *payzans* about the music, about rhythm, about the culture and everything, because we are African.

Boukman made its reputation performing at Kanaval in Haiti. Their songs became rallying cries.

The band's first Kanaval hit, "Ke M Pa Sote," helped topple a government.

[Fade in Boukman Ekspereyans "Ke M Pa Sote"]

Theodore Lolo Beaubrun: They let us sing the music and we were singing the music like crazy!

Again, Lolo Beaubrun in his yard in Jacmel. He says the military was pulling out all the stops to prevent Boukman Ekspereyans from playing.

THEODORE LOLO BEAUBRUN: Twelve days after the Kanaval, the people went on the street and, and peacefully, they're singing the song, "K M Pa Sote", they're singing the song. And twelve days after, General Avril, who was in power, left without any bloodshed, left the power without any bloodshed.

The song helped usher in a brief period of peace in Haiti.

THEODORE LOLO BEAUBRUN: This is the power of the music you see? ...The spirit did that music. This is the spirit.

LORI MARTINEAU: I don't know...I'm trying to compare it to like an American, like bad-ass revolutionary point in time and music. But Boukman definitely has been that over the years. Yeah.

LINDA RENO: A bit Bob Dylan-y. A little like, you know, a little just like in your face, but also poetic and you know?

These are my friends Lori Martineau and Linda Reno. They run an organization called Haitianola.

Lori was growing up in Haiti when bands like Boukman were getting big.

They influenced more groups to use their music against the government, especially during Kanaval.

She says people knew it took so much courage for these groups to speak out in such a loud, public way.

LORI MARTINEAU: It's scary! It's like they take what's happening politically and they, like, make jokes about it [song starts playing].

This is a 2020 Kanaval song.

LORI MARTINEAU: This one's called "Lock." So the past, since kind of like November, December, the political problems, it's been called a "Lock," like a lockdown. The country was locked down, so this song's called "Lock." Haitians have a cultural habit of like, you can look at something and it could be so hard and painful and they take it and they find a way to laugh about it

NATHALIE CERIN: The bands, like Boukman, you could always count on their songs being very political.

Nathalie Cerin is a musician and writer based in Philadelphia. She's the editor of Woy Magazine, a publication that seeks to connect Haitian in the diaspora with those in Haiti.

She grew up between Port Au Prince and Philly, and she's always been obsessed with hearing the new music groups write for Kanaval season.

NATHALIE CERIN: So I remember having Carnival tunes about, like, inflation and we would be dancing. And talking about like the value of the dollar in our buying power decreasing because of inflation and, you know, Boukman singing about politicians abusing their power and then there's, you know, there's other genres for sure.

[T-Vice – Helicopter]

Compas is a dance music genre that was born in Haiti. It fuses African rhythms with European-style ballroom dancing. It's wildly popular all over the world.

Compas features a steady pulsing beat.

NATHALIE CERIN: They tend to make up songs that have a lot of dance moves that go with them, you know? So like, I remember one year there was the group T Vice, who is arguably the most popular compa band having a song called “Helicopter” and everyone would take off their shirt and spin it around like a helicopter.

[Fade up T-Vice - “Helicopter” and out.]

RICHARD MORSE: You write something and then 10 million people are aware of it all of a sudden.

Richard Morse leads RAM — one of the most influential Haitian bands of the past 25 years. Although he spent his childhood in Connecticut, his mother — Emerante Morse — was a well-known Haitian folklorist. He says she made sure he was steeped in vodou rhythms and traditional music.

Before Kanaval, he feels a sensation way more intense than stage fright.

[RAM - “Ambago”]

RICHARD MORSE: People are wondering, “Is he going to get in trouble? Is he going to - are *they* going to get in trouble?” You know, “Are they going to get killed?” When I was in a band in New Jersey playing in clubs, I wasn't thinking that. I wasn't thinking, I didn't even speak Creole at that time. I didn't even know there was a Haitian audience, you know, I mean this all just kind of evolved. Um, and, and suddenly people are interpreting all your songs.

[RAM - “Fey”]

RICHARD MORSE: And so when we wrote “Fey,” you know, the song, there were some lyrics that said, “I only have one son, they made him leave the country.” And so, and then it's got this other thing. It says, “I'm a leaf on a branch, a bad storm came and knocked me down/ The day I fall is not the day I die.” People can understand what that means or not understand or, or figure out how is that going to be interpreted? Well, the “leaf on a branch, bad storm

came and knocked me down,” that became interpreted as a coup d'etat. Is that a stretch? I don't know.

Haitians are looking for that. Haitians are looking for that parable that's going to help them get through the smoke, and help them get through the night, and help them understand where they stand.

Richard and his band outlived the death threats. And they've never stopped delivering their brand of political music.

The band, including lead singer and Richard's wife Lunise Morse, holds down a steady Thursday night gig at the historic Hotel Oloffson in Port Au Prince.

A gingerbread palace of a property that Graham Greene made famous in his novel "The Comedians" and that Richard bought in 1987.

MARYSE DEJEAN: Music in Haiti is really the weapon for revolution.

That's Maryse DeJean — an on-air personality at WWOZ, a non-commercial radio station in New Orleans. She grew up in Port au Prince.

[Blue Dot Sessions - "Vibrant Canopy"]

MARYSE DEJEAN: If you are on the ground in Haiti, I think that you are constantly resisting. You're constantly figuring out how you are going to survive. And there are levels of revolution, and I'm not talking about, you know, insurrection, et cetera, but you know, you have to really think every day, every moment when you are there about how you are going to survive. Not just survive, but how you are going to thrive.

Maryse says music is central to life in Haiti. It permeates *everything*. And it always comes back to the rhythms.

MARYSE DEJEAN: Part of it is drawn from Voudou rhythms. Part of it is a mix of what Haitian culture really is, you know, the, the African nations, you know, the, the influx of

Spanish and English and French, and also the, the Indigenous Taíno people. And yes, there are profound statements made, political statements, with the music.

This way of life resonates with the people of New Orleans.

Take “Louisiana 1927” — a lament Randy Newman composed in the mid-1970’s. At the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, New Orleans singer John Boutte performs it.

[John Boutte - “Louisiana 1927”]

Boutte repurposed the song as an anthem for the city after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The chorus lyrics go, “They’re trying to wash us away” — a feeling that resonates with audiences thrashed by nature and a negligent, heartless government.

It’s a song that stands the test of time in New Orleans.

Music, spiritually connecting both places for 215 years and counting.

You’re listening to Kanaval: Haitian Rhythms and the Music of New Orleans.

We’ll be back in a minute.

END SEGMENT B

SEGMENT C

Welcome back to Kanaval: Haitian Rhythms and the Music of New Orleans. I’m Leyla McCalla.

Like most people, I’ve spent a lot of time at home in 2020. Tour dates, recording sessions, an interactive theater show — all cancelled.

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced all of us to account for how we take care of each other. And it's underlined the local, national, and global inequalities that make it so difficult for so many people to thrive.

[Leyla McCalla - "A Day for the Hunter, A Day for the Prey"]

I named my 2016 album after a Haitian proverb: "A Day for the Hunter, A Day for the Prey." The ethnomusicologist Gage Averill wrote a book with that title and the phrase shook me.

On one level, I heard it as one day for the oppressor and one day for the oppressed. A phrase that only survival during the experience of slavery could have produced.

On another level, it made me think of the roles we all play throughout our lifetimes.

This especially rings true now as I feel like we live in a society that tells us we need to do all these things to take care of ourselves and our families, and then gives us so little of what we need to make that possible.

We are sometimes the hunter, sometimes the prey.

I wrote this title track thinking about refugees who travel by boat from Haiti to the United States. I was thinking about the desperation and vulnerability of the position they're in. I felt that this proverb really captures the essence of the Haitian spirit; to me, it's linked to the struggle for human rights.

Every day I'm thinking about how hard life is for so many in America and in Haiti. These Haitian proverbs resonate through time because the world has not fundamentally changed.

There's just so much wisdom to be gained from Haitian culture.

CHICO BOYER: We are in Ditmas Park in Ditmas, beautiful area in Brooklyn. They call it Flatbush and I've been living here for, for a while. Oh man, 20 years.

We met Chico Boyer a little while back. He's one of the founding members of Boukman Ekseperians. These days, in Brooklyn, he spends his time producing records, playing in Paul Beaubrun's band, and beekeeping

CHICO BOYER: We have a studio, recording studio I've been using mostly for the Haitian community, but everybody's welcome. We bring everybody here, and we can make some nice noise - better have the noise of the music than any other noise. [laughs]

Paul released a critically acclaimed album in early 2020. It's called *Ransableman* or "a big gathering." His band had been set to tour the world.

Then, Chico says, the pandemic struck.

CHICO BOYER: We lost the band, we lost a lot of gigs.....

After spending most of the first half of 2020 in lockdown, Paul and Chico decided to host weekly concerts in Chico's side yard. They called them "Healing Saturdays."

CHICO BOYER: And we decided, okay, we're going to bring the people to, to us and give them, make them feel better. We know that nobody, not everybody gets access to music. With the music, we could have a sense of self, you know, preserving common sense, anything we decide to spread it. So we don't care, let's play some music for the neighborhood and, here we go, everybody enjoyed it.

These shows started off relatively small. But very soon they were attracting big crowds. Happy, dancing people. Safely distanced and masked.

CHICO BOYER: The joy that, that's seen on the face of these people coming here, That's what we want. Make people feel happy for a few hours. They could forget their problems and everything. That's the goal. That feels good. Our neighborhood, they love it. And I'm so happy that we have, we have done it.

CHICO BOYER: What we learn from the pandemic is a lesson for everybody. I [00:33:40] think everybody should learn from what is going on. We are living in a small world. We

came from the same place. We're going to go back to the same [00:38:20] place. So what's in between, let's make the world a better place... *c'mon*.

Paul Beaubrun echoes Chico's sentiment that Haitians are experts at finding ways to survive, physically and spiritually.

PAUL BEAUBRUN: We need music right now. Music is more important than any other time I can think of, right at this moment we're living, because we're staying in our home almost all day, every day. What else are we going to do?

Music can help you change your mood. Music can help you with finding yourself and to be more comfortable. Music is extremely important.

People often use the word "resilient" to describe the people of Haiti. Same goes for the people of New Orleans.

This word tries to acknowledge the massive challenges the people of these places have endured. The 2010 earthquake in Haiti that killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced millions more. Hurricane Katrina in 2005, a disaster caused by a government-built levy system that catastrophically failed.

All the systemic inequities, deep dysfunctions, and struggles people in these places had to endure before and in between.

To outsiders, "resilience" might sound heroic. To people who have to hang in there, it can feel like living in a cage.

Here's what people from Haiti want everyone else to know about their home.

[Atis Indepandan - "Singing of My Country"]

MARYSE DEJEAN: First of all, we, as Haitians, do not see Haiti as the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere.

WWOZ radio host Maryse DeJean fled Haiti with her family when she was a child. Although she's lived in New Orleans for decades, she still feels most at home in the capital of Haiti.

MARYSE DEJEAN: It's a country that is very rich in culture. It's very rich in traditions, but living there as enslaved Africans was so brutal that it really didn't matter if the quest for independence seemed suicidal because it would have been better to die than to continue under that brutal system.

Remember, she tells us, that France forced Haitians to pay reparations in order to remain independent after the revolution. That debt lasted into the mid-20th century.

MARYSE DEJEAN: I think that it's a country that's being systematically impoverished, but it's by no means, you know, the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. Consider the resistance, the resilience, the *strength* of Haitian people who manage to make a lot out of very little every day. The sacrifices that parents make to try to get the children to school. You'll see school children who are beautiful, you know, with the uniforms clean and pressed. And then you see the areas that they come out of. You know that there's a lot of love there. And then the music that we hear that has influenced so much of the world, for centuries.

PAUL BEAUBRUN: I think Haiti is a real country of survival.

Bandleader Paul Beaubrun.

PAUL BEAUBRUN: Haitians, we've always had this view because of our ancestors, from abolishing slavery and all of that, that's in our DNA. You know, to make this world a better place, through freedom, through expression, through culture, through music, through all of that. So I want the listeners to just go make a little research about Haiti. The beauty in all of the things we've contributed to the United States, to a lot of countries in Latin America. You know, all of the things we've contributed to the world.

Philadelphia-based writer and musician Nathalie Cerin says the history and spirit of the Haitian Revolution inspires *her* to imagine a better world.

[Blue Dot Sessions - "Wistful"]

NATHALIE CERIN: The leaders of the Haitian revolution had to pull from their most radical imaginations because they never knew a world where slavery didn't exist. They didn't know a world where people who were taken from Africa and yanked to here could be autonomous and run their own country. They didn't let every single fact of reality that pointed to that being completely unrealistic, stop them. Right? Yeah. They were like, we know we want to be free. What does that look like? How will that play out? It doesn't matter.

Nathalie says “reasonable” people denounce dreams of a better world as “radical.” She adds that Haitians are better at that than anyone else.

NATHALIE CERIN: How are we limiting even how we dream of things, right? Like, sit down, think about your neighborhood in the most ideal world in the most ideal world, what would funding go to in your neighborhood? What would a thriving community look like? Don't see what's realistic! Dream it. If our ancestors were thinking about what was realistic, the revolution wouldn't have started. They would start, like, some committee meetings with the enslavers and be like, “Hey, how can we work out y'all giving us a cent or two at the end of the day?” No, no, no, no, no, no. They were like, “*We dream a world where slavery does not exist.*”

NATHALIE CERIN: I don't want to downplay the harsh conditions that are over there, you know? I don't want to be like, those people are like, “*we have to change the narrative of poverty*” because poverty is very real in Haiti. But I always want to point to the beauty that exists. I always want to point to the brilliance that exists, you know? That the people who are imagining and fighting for new worlds, they still exist in Haiti.

Fade in Northside Skull and Bone gang scene and music

BRUCE BARNES: We call our family spirits to come out, invite them to come in, embody us and take the streets of the city and wake the city up, wake the world up is what he would call it. Wake the world up to a new Carnival day.

Bruce “Sunpie” Barnes isn't only a world class zydeco musician. He's also the chief of the Northside Skull and Bone Gang. One of the oldest Mardi Gras groups in the city. It's been around since 1819 — 15 years after the Haitian revolution.

Before the sun rises on Mardi Gras day, Bruce and his krewe don papier mache masks, gather in a cemetery and sing and pray.

BRUCE BARNES: To look at a Carnival in a context where it's not just one thing. It's not just all about being on a big float, nothing wrong with those, but the real beauty of Carnival is like being on the ground, man, on your feet in a neighborhood masking, producing things that don't just let you get around and forget that Carnival is still the shedding of the flesh, so you have to show the toughest parts of everyday life, just like you can show the beauty and you can do both at the same time.

Bruce masks as the Loa Gede, the Haitian lord of the dead. We met his Haitian counterpart earlier, during Fete Gede in Jacmel.

He says dressing this way every year reminds him of the strong African sensibility running through the veins of New Orleans and Haiti.

BRUCE BARNES: We need each other in so many different ways and yeah, that's the beauty of, you know, being able to connect and keep those deep roots. Um, especially right now with, with Haiti, when it comes to the head nod of what Carnival is... you have someone masking that's giving the most harsh political direct context about, let's just say COVID-19, and someone giving the directness of pretending to be a king or queen or a rich executive. And it shows beauty and ugliness at the same time.

And it's easy to, to have some fluidity and move between the two, two of those things at the same time. And it's the, the fact that you have that much variety it gives people who come to visit much, much more than, what they ever could, could dream up. Can't dream that fast or that wide, and with that much variety.

PAUL BEAUBRUN: Carnival is a very important tradition for us.

[Lakou Mizik - "Sa Na Kenbe"]

Again, Haitian musician Paul Beaubrun.

PAUL BEAUBRUN: Carnival is a therapy for Haitians. It's like it's a time where people let everything out. It's a time you dance however you want to dance. You scream. Some people, you curse if you want, because you have to let your frustrations out and it's that time. That's the way it is.

Paul says Kanaval is a celebration of life, community, and belonging. An eruption of euphoria and beauty, in good times and bad.

PAUL BEAUBRUN: And at the same time, it's that time where, for us, you almost start your year because it's new. We call that *brulee*. That means you're burning everything and then you start new.

Music is a form of prayer in New Orleans and across the sea in Haiti.

It's an heirloom passed from our African ancestors to our forebears in Haiti to the refugees who found their way to New Orleans.

And music is central to the way people living in these places navigate this chaotic and messy world. The soundscape connects the living and the dead, the present with the past.

CREDITS

[RAM - "Ambago"]

This hour of Kanaval: Haitian Rhythms and the Music of New Orleans was written and produced by Alex Lewis.

For more stories, visit our website at [xpn kanaval dot o-r-g](http://xpnkanaval.org).

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I'm Leyla McCalla. Thanks for listening.