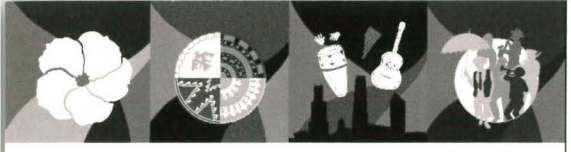

"So Much of My Life, Well, Drowned"

Edna Gundersen

While Katrina's rage and receding floodwaters left heartbreak in every ruined home, New Orleans' music culture was hit especially hard. Performers fled and have been slow to return. Trampled neighborhoods that normally vibrate with brass bands and jazz ensembles are ghost towns, unplugging crucial incubators.

Many of the city's most respected musicians suffered severe blows and yet remain committed to the jazz culture that defines their lives and New Orleans' character. Michael White, clarinetist, composer and historian, lost his home and a priceless 30-year collection of music and artifacts. White's spacious Gentilly house, bordering the breached London Canal, had been a shrine to music, each room storing vast treasures in custom-built cases. Now it's a lethal labyrinth of rust, decay and rotting documents. White enters gingerly.

"It's still hard to be here," he says. "Don't touch anything. It's been bleached and aired out, but everything's toxic. It sat in nine feet of water for three weeks. Mold and mildew took care of the rest."

White, 51, lost a huge collection of jazz and African-American archives, CDs, vinyl albums and 45s, books, artifacts and paintings. A professor of African-American music at Xavier University, he used the materials in classes.

He's particularly distressed by the loss of detailed interviews with now-dead musicians who knew Louis Armstrong and of rare sheet music—original scores, brass-band dirges, pieces by Jelly Roll Morton and Joe "King" Oliver. "They're irreplaceable, and they just disappeared into that," White says, pointing to slabs of muck at his feet. "There were so many chemicals in the water."

Surveying the chaotic debris in his office, he notices a crumpled stack of treasured biographies. "I see a new layer of black stuff has grown on these," he says flatly, standing near file cabinets that are rusted shut. "Oh, and I see copies of my dissertation!"

His books, the envy of New Orleans libraries, included autographed and out-of-print volumes on Louisiana music and culture. African masks and instruments are gone, plus 50 vintage clarinets, including those owned by Paul Barnes and Raymond Burke. He had Jabbo Smith's trumpet mouthpiece and a clarinet mouthpiece used by hero Sidney Bechet. "I scoured this place a thousand times for that one," White says.

White played as a teen in Doc Paulin's Brass Band, and later, through famed trumpeter Kid Sheik, he enjoyed a long association with dozens of jazz elders born between the late 1890s and 1910. He played in the Fairview Baptist Church Band, established by banjo/guitar icon Danny Barker, and formed the Original Liberty Jazz Band in 1981. Today he carries the traditional jazz torch with them, and in the Michael White Quartet.

"When I played with those older people, I collected things they discarded," he says. "Drumsticks, bass strings. I had thousands of photos." Ruined pictures of bandleader Kid Thomas and White meeting Wynton Marsalis in 1985 are fused to the wall. His brass band hat lies warped on a table.

On the drive away, he points out St. Raymond Church on Paris Avenue, site of numerous jazz funerals. Across the Industrial Canal into the Ninth Ward, White recognizes landmarks of his youth. His parents' home on Lizardi is abandoned. He was given his first clarinet, a toy, at St. David Catholic Church, now shuttered, along with St. David School, where he attended with Fats Domino's kids. On Caffin Street, Domino's canary-yellow house, like most others, is vacant.

"I view the city as Mardi Gras," White says. "There's reality and a masked reality. A lot looks functional, like Jazz Fest and the French Quarter. And then there's this. Musicians are gone, and that's a real threat. It's hell trying to book jobs. If we lose the Ninth, we risk losing the heart and soul of the culture.

"We have one of the most important cultures in this country. We lost a lot from neglect, but there's still so much that's unique. The spirit of the city comes from not just musicians and (Mardi Gras) Indians, but the eccentric characters. Jazz reflects a way of life that's improvisational."

White has been forced to improvise, bouncing between here and his apartment in Houston, where he moved his 83-year-old mother. "I have a FEMA trailer on campus about as big as one of my bathrooms," he says. "I have no sense of home, and I don't know how I could have any sense of my life anywhere else. My life is all about New Orleans music and culture. So much of my life, well, drowned. And the prognosis here is not good when you consider coastal erosion, global warming and the fact that the levee system is shot. I hear people say, 'It's over, move on.' We'd love to forget it, but it's ongoing. We're in limbo."

Though unsure of his future, White isn't paralyzed. He says: "Tragedy can be good for art. I've been writing songs and practicing more. I'm told my playing is more passionate. I feel a renewed sense of urgency about music. I realize it's the most valuable thing I have."

Jazz clarinetist and music professor Michael White lost his huge collection of recordings, sheet music, books and instruments at his home in the Gentilly section. Photo by H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY.