

# LOUISIANA'S HISTORIC MUSIC HALLS

4 legendary places

BY MEGAN HILL



## SOCIAL AID, PLEASURE AND JAZZ MUSIC

Nestled among enormous, arching oak trees trimmed with Spanish moss, on an unassuming street in Old Mandeville, sits a weathered wooden building that looks as if it has stories to tell. Most of the time, the *Dew Drop Jazz and Social Hall* (formerly known as the Dew Drop Social and Benevolent Hall) looks more like a relic than an active music hall; its gray wood exterior is devoid of paint or stain, left exposed to the elements. Its shutters and front door are tightly sealed, almost as if they've been boarded up for years.

But this 1895 structure just a few blocks north of Lake Pontchartrain is anything but defunct. For musicians like Deacon John, Preservation Hall Jazz Band, A.J. Croce and more, the Dew Drop is an intimate, lively stage that holds within its walls the very essence of Louisiana's rich music culture.

On nights when musicians play, string

lights are plugged in, the front doors are flung open, and so many patrons stream in that the tiny venue's benches fill to capacity. Other concert-goers must bring lawn chairs and enjoy the show from outside the inn's doors; but all the better, for they have access to fresh air (the hall isn't air-conditioned) and food for purchase provided by the ladies of the First Free Mission Baptist Church next door.

The Dew Drop stakes its claim as the oldest unaltered rural jazz hall in the world. The hall is owned by the city of Mandeville and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The building was originally constructed to serve as the headquarters of the Dew Drop Social and Benevolent Association, which formed "to care for the sick with food and attention; to provide help in funeral arrangements; to provide food for needy and temporary housing – all during a period of time when black residents could not obtain various types of insurance," according to the hall's website.

The community proved a receptive audience for early jazz musicians who crossed Lake Pontchartrain by steamboat. Soon, they began playing at the Dew Drop – and the

rest is history. Jazz icons from New Orleans have played within these walls, including Kid Ory, Bunk Johnson and Buddy Petit. That's just the start of what has become a 120-year-old tradition.

Given the inextricable way that music is woven into Louisiana's cultural fabric, it comes as no surprise that there are scores of historic music halls scattered around the state – some as intimate as the Dew Drop, with its important ties to the immediate community around it, and others that are nationally and even internationally known, where musicians and performers like Elvis and Johnny Cash have held court. What each of them have in common is that they've been around long enough to bear witness to Louisiana's – and in some cases, the country's or the world's – musical history.

The Dew Drop Jazz and Social Hall, located in Mandeville on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The building originally served as the headquarters of a social aid club.

## A PLACE TO SHARE IDEAS

One of the most well-known is **Preservation Hall in New Orleans**. Though not as old as Dew Drop, Preservation Hall was founded in 1961, and it's provided a key stage for the city's jazz musicians and an important role in preserving the city's jazz heritage.

"All of the earliest players at Preservation Hall were legends before the Hall even opened: Punch Miller, Sweet Emma Barrett, the Humphrey Brothers, Billie & De De Pierce, Jim Robinson, Cie Frazier, Papa John Joseph. The list goes on," says Preservation Hall's managing director, Ron Rona. "As far as the traditional New Orleans jazz style as a whole, we believe the

development of this style is a living tradition that continues today through the players playing the music now – both here at the Hall, around the city and to the world. That's what we're here to present and to facilitate."

Preservation Hall was born during a time when

much of the country was gravitating toward the new wave sounds of rock 'n' roll and bebop, so much so that many jazz musicians found themselves out of work – and without a venue to carry on their traditions. They found some solace in a small art gallery on

St. Peter Street in the French Quarter, where jam sessions evolved into legitimate concerts. The art gallery moved out, and Preservation Hall was born. The enterprise now includes the Preservation Hall Jazz Band and the Preservation Hall

Foundation, with various educational initiatives, archives, and workshops.

Attendees at the Hall's nightly concerts observe a sort of living history, the act of preservation and perpetuation in real time.

"We like to think of this not only as a place for listeners, but also a place for the players," says Rona. "A place for them to share their ideas, teach and pass on those ideas and present them to the people. We help provide an opportunity to present those ideas to the world on tour and for schools across the globe."



In an art-filled building in the 1960s, history was created and resurrected when Allan and Sandra Jaffe purchased a gallery from Larry Borenstein and turned it into what is now Preservation Hall. Borenstein and the Jaffes sought to preserve and foster the growth of traditional New Orleans jazz. Despite the era's Jim Crow laws and racial tensions, the Hall brought people together for the pleasure of live music.

## PRESERVING CAJUN CULTURE AND MUSIC

**The Liberty Theater** has helped put the city of Eunice, in Cajun country, on the proverbial map. The renovated 1924 vaudeville theater and movie house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and hosts a weekly concert series called "Rendezvous des Cajuns" radio show in French.

The theater is important not only for hosting notable acts like Fatty Arbuckle, Tex Ritter, Jimmy Clanton, the Bowery Boys, and Roy Rogers, but also for its role in preserving Cajun culture – through music. Every Saturday night the theater's live radio show, "Rendezvous des Cajuns" mixes live Cajun and zydeco music with storytelling in a blend described as a mix of Grand Old Opry and "Prairie Home Companion."



The show is emceed mostly in Cajun French, "with enough English spoken so that everyone can enjoy this unique and one-of-a-kind experience," the show's website says. Listeners can attend the show live (and hit the dance floor while they're at it), or listen to it broadcast on the radio. The concerts are often preceded by cooking demonstrations and other musical performances and events like the annual crawfish etouffee cook-off, all of which help preserve various aspects of Cajun culture.



**top:** 2009 Liberty Theater Mardi Gras Show: Reggie Matte and Terry Huval **bottom:** Patrons dancing to Ivy Dugas and the Cajun Cousins with Walter Mouton at the Liberty Theater



**above:** Louisiana Hayride steel guitar player Sonny Trammel talks with event emcee "Shotgun" Ken Shepherd during the Louisiana Hayride Bicentennial Bash event on June 20. **right:** The view from the stage of Shreveport's Municipal Auditorium.

## LAUNCHING ELVIS INTO STARDOM

One of – if not the most – famous music venues in Louisiana is **Shreveport's Municipal Auditorium**, home of the Louisiana Hayride radio (and later television) concert series that ran from 1948 through the 1960s and helped launch some of the biggest acts in American country music. It became known as "The Cradle of the Stars" for its role in introducing so many internationally famous acts to the world.

It was on this stage on Oct. 16, 1954 that a teenage musician named Elvis Presley made his performance debut. The next year, Presley famously gyrated into living rooms across the country as the show's television version broadcast his first such appearance. Presley performed every Saturday night on the show for the next 18 months, on television in the U.S. and internationally via the Armed Forces Radio. "But prior to that, the Louisiana Hayride had featured Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, Sr., Ernest Tubb, Willie Nelson even, as a kid," says Sam Voisin, the auditorium's regional general manager. "Back then it was old-style country music, which

was mainly folk music. Then when Elvis hit the stage, it kind of turned from folk music to rockabilly and thus turning into rock 'n' roll. The turning point was on that stage in that



venue because he was broadcast to the world." Other notable musicians, including blues musician Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter, James Brown, Aretha Franklin and B.B. King have also taken the stage at this National Historic Landmark. "At one time or another, most notable musicians that you would hear of today

have played on that stage," says Voisin. The 1929 building continues to host concerts, though they're not all of a contemporary nature: ghosts of musicians past are rumored to still wander the aisles. As Voisin says, "Elvis has not left the building, apparently." ■

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