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Preservation's Hall: The Dew Drop Dance and Social Hall

by Stephen Faure

A plain wooden box of a building sits in Mandeville, framed by a pair of fern-covered, moss-draped live oaks on Lamarque Street. The oaks look ancient, but they are probably not as old as the building itself, the Dew Drop Social and Benevolent Hall No. 2. It's been there, about four blocks from the lake, since 1895—long enough to look as much of a part of the earth as the oaks on either side of it. The interior is bare, except for some wooden benches, a small raised stage and an old player piano.

Friends of the Dew Drop

The hall has always had an existence rooted in community. Before life, health and burial insurance policies became widely available in the African-American community, groups often formed for members to pool their resources to help when times got tough or tragedy befell a constituent. The Dew Drop Social and Benevolence Association was one of those groups. Dances, dinners and member dues financed funerals and helped pay medical bills. Members sat with the sick and prepared food for the families of the ill. The hall was the center of activity for the black community.

“Many things went on in that hall. It was used for anniversaries, entertainments and concerts. The most popular events were the balls and dances,” said Celeste Lee, one of the Dew Drop's members. In 1985, at the age of 93, she recalled, “The hall was the center of our social life. I remember the dances. They were my favorite. We used to sell gumbo and other things outside the hall to make money for the club.”

As concerned citizens once rallied together at the Dew Drop Hall to help each other, a new group has formed to come to the hall's rescue. The Friends of the Dew Drop, LLC, is a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and possible increased utilization of the Dew Drop hall. Bernie Cyrus is its chairman; he became involved with the Dew Drop during his stint as director of the Louisiana Music Commission.

“It's just always been sitting there,” says board member Cathy Deano. She, along with attorney Edward Deano; Trilby Lenfant; Zella Walker; architect Lynn Mitchell; former Dew Drop owner Jacqueline “Jinx” Vidrine, Ph.D.; Peggy Baldwin; Richard Boyd; Renee Maloney; Simmie Farley; and Bill Sims make up the Friends of the Dew Drop board.

The Building

Mitchell says the building is of typical barge-board construction. The process is simple: vertical planks are attached to horizontal beams; bead boards are attached to seal the joints. The wood is almost bare now, but Mitchell points out traces of the original blue-green creosote stain that remain at the roofline where the ceiling joists protrude outside, another characteristic of barge-board construction. The architect says the building is great for concerts, whether you're inside or sitting out under the oaks. “It's like a big speaker,” he says. “You can put your hand on the wall and feel the music.”

The building had fallen into disuse by the 1940s, when a larger, more comfortable club was built

on Marigny Street, a hall called Sons and Daughters. “It’s a good thing they stopped using it,” says Mitchell. “Sons and Daughters burned to the ground, as these things tended to do. The Dew Drop didn’t.”

There are two odd groups of holes in the side of the building near the front door. The holes are at eye level, one group with holes about one inch in diameter clustered on one board, and a few feet away, another group. Mitchell believes there once were bathroom facilities there and the holes provided ventilation. A rectangular area of different-colored boards on the floor underneath the holes and an old pipe on the outside seem to bear this out. According to Mitchell, the simple floral stenciling along the top of the wall and forming an aisle in the center of the floor leading to the stage is not an original decoration. “They did that when the Dew Drop was used to shoot the wedding scene between Brooke Shields’ and David Carradine’s characters in the movie ‘Pretty Baby,’ back in the ’70s. If you rent the DVD, it’s a short scene, but you can see it there.”

Jazz’s Journey to the Dew Drop

Jazz was traveling music from the beginning. It jumped from club to club in the city, and then musicians played it on steamboats going between New Orleans and Mandeville, entertaining passengers to pay for their trip. It journeyed from its New Orleans cradle—Storyville brothels, Milneburg taverns, rough-and-tumble juke joints like the Funky Butt Hall and Matranga’s—all the way to Chicago and New York, and spread everywhere to take the world by storm. But first, it had to pass through the northshore.

Northshore native Karl Koenig, Ph.D., also known as “Dr. Jazz,” is world-renowned for his meticulous documentation of what could best be described as the “geography” of jazz. Now a California resident, Dr. Koenig has written several articles and many books on jazz music, musicians and the various venues where jazz was born. (More than 30 books are available on his website, basinstreet.com.)

Dr. Koenig explains, “Along the shoreline of the northern part of Lake Pontchartrain, there were three boat landings and a number of hotels, all using live music.” The musicians played a local circuit. “Their itinerary might include playing in Madisonville on Friday night, the Dew Drop Dance Hall on Saturday night and Abita Springs on Sunday. The circuit might include Bogalusa on Monday and other small towns on other nights. They might return to play the Dew Drop on Wednesday, sleep there and catch the boat back to New Orleans for a job on Thursday.” Dr. Koenig says the Dew Drop held at least two dances a week.

A “Who’s Who” of jazz legends played the Dew Drop, including none other than Satchmo himself, Louis Armstrong. That may be controversial, but it was confirmed when Dr. Koenig interviewed Celeste Lee in 1985. She said, “I remember many of the musicians that played there, such as Buddy Petit. My sister’s husband played with him, Papa Celestin, Louis Armstrong, Sam Morgan, the Fritz Brothers Band and so many more.”

Dr. Koenig says many early jazz musicians were originally from or lived in Mandeville. This included Buddy Petit, George Lewis, Ernie Cagnolatti, Andy Anderson, Tom Ladnier, Dan Moody, Bunk Johnson, Frank Lewis, George Washington, Ed Hall, Leon and Ralph Laurents, Klebert Cagnolatti and the Fritz family—Isidore, Louis, Joe Lucien and Papa Fritz.

Preserving a Treasure

Dew Drop board member Edward Deano says the Dew Drop and other northshore venues helped sustain jazz before it made its way throughout the country. “The [local] music scene was incredible; the Dixieland era really was saved over here. A lot of the musicians played dance halls between Baton Rouge and Biloxi and [the Dew Drop] was the last one. It’s a real important aspect of jazz history to be preserved.”

The roots of the Friends of the Dew Drop organization lay in various preservation movements over the years. As historians such as Dr. Koenig researched the hall’s history, more and more people began to realize what a treasure it was. Vidrine decided to purchase the property, which still belonged to the Dew Drop Benevolent Association. Its last members were tracked down, the title was cleared and Vidrine became the Dew Drop’s owner. “My dream was to save some history and keep it in the neighborhood,” she says.

The first priority was to have it placed on the National Register of Historic Places, an honor that was quickly granted. Soon the National Park Service contacted her, wanting to acquire the Dew Drop and move it to Armstrong Park in New Orleans. Other people and groups became interested, and eventually Vidrine decided to sell the land and donate the building to the City of Mandeville. The donation came with some conditions, including that the building be used for the community’s benefit and that it not be moved.

“It’s probably better known in Europe than here,” Vidrine says. Jazz fans, including groups from the United Kingdom and Germany, have made pilgrimages to the Dew Drop. The Ken Colyer Trust, a U.K. organization, has organized visits to the Dew Drop, held concerts there and has made donations for the Dew Drop’s benefit, including two benches outside the building.

Few buildings like the Dew Drop—dance halls or clubs that hosted celebrated musicians at the beginning of the jazz era—still exist in their original condition. Dr. Koenig notes one other example in the area, however: the Halfway House in New Orleans. Built around 1915 and popular until about 1930, the building is located at the intersection of City Park Avenue and the Pontchartrain Expressway. The New Basin canal once covered the expressway’s route to West End. During that time, travelers from downtown took a shell road following the canal; the club was located half the way to West End, thus its name.

Dr. Koenig believes a community effort similar to the one behind the Dew Drop is necessary to preserve the Halfway House. “Much like the Dew Drop Dance and Social Hall in Mandeville, the Halfway House needs help to keep it intact and have it become a historic site. New Orleans bulldozed Louis Armstrong’s house, and there are few historic jazz locations left. With the Halfway House’s past, it should be converted into a jazz museum.”

Vidrine’s initial efforts to preserve the Dew Drop and keep it a member of the community have been very successful, thanks to the many people who truly are friends of the Dew Drop. In a way, it has come full circle: first as a meeting place for community members helping each other, and now as a place for people from the community to meet to save it.

Now that its place on Lamarque Street appears safe for years to come, the city and the Dew Drop board must decide how best to use the structure, which is in a quiet residential area. Helping in that effort is a recent \$20,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Vidrine says they would like to rent the hall out for events such as weddings and birthdays.

Events in the recent past included a concert recorded by the National Park Service that was attended by a group from the Ken Colyer Trust in Britain. In a scene reminiscent of the benevolent society's past, women from the church next door cooked red beans and gumbo, which they sold to the happy visitors as a way to raise funds for the church. "The kids that live on the street came up and showed the Brits how to second line," Vidrine remembers. "They thought we had hired the children to come dance for them!"

"The Dew Drop was always for the community," she says. "I would love for us to have musical and theater performances with a percentage to go to a cause. I want that spirit to go on and on and on."

To support the Dew Drop and keep up with future events held there, go to dewdropjazzhall.com.

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