

Cruising to New Orleans on a Virgin Voyage



Buddy Guy wowed at both his standing-room-only performances
Photo by © Joseph A. Rosen

By Kate Martinelli of Ozcat Radio, Vallejo, CA

I'll admit it – I was a 50-year-old New Orleans virgin. I talked a good game – I've seen all the documentaries, movies and TV shows; I make beignets, king cakes, muffalattas and gumbo for our annual Mardi Gras party...but I had never been to New Orleans. When *Blues Festival Guide's* publisher Kaati told me about the Legendary Rhythm and Blues Cruise (LRBC) New Orleans trip in October 2015, and described her amazing experience of coming into the Port of New Orleans via the Mississippi river, I booked passage for myself and my husband David.

I was a returning cruiser, while David was a Blues Cruise virgin as well as a NOLA virgin. It turns out our ship, Holland America's ms Westerdam, was also a virgin – she would be making her maiden port of call in New Orleans.

On the morning of our arrival in New Orleans, I awoke to a new sound – the large waves of the Gulf of Mexico had given way to the smaller lapping waves of the Mississippi – we were on the river! Up on deck, I met the distinct earthy smell of the mighty Mississippi. My arms prickled with history and nostalgia as we wove our way towards the "Crescent City."

Sightseeing from the top deck, I ran into singer and pianist Marcia Ball. She pointed out historical sites of note such as the site of the Battle of New Orleans. She actually sang the song impromptu for those of us gathered around her – you know the one, sung by Johnny Horton and others – it goes:

In 1814 we took a little trip

Along with Colonel Jackson down the mighty Mississip'

We took a little bacon and we took a little beans

And we caught the bloody British in the town of New Orleans.

We noticed a flurry of activity as the ship docked and we headed out to experience New Orleans for the first time. The crew lined up along the deck to greet Carnival Corporation President and CEO Arnold W. Donald for the maiden port ceremony, and our musical experience began right away as a full New Orleans jazz band greeted the ship.

Like all newbies, we started the day shopping in the French Quarter, browsing through glittering stores filled with antiques, jewelry, Mardi Gras masks and more. We stopped for street corner buskers from all over the world who had made the NOLA pilgrimage; we even met a band called Jeez Louise playing in an intersection that was from our neck of the woods in Northern California. We meandered onto Bourbon Street where I bought an enormous Hurricane cocktail, which you can carry on the street and from bar to bar as you please, and it's sure to last you all day. On Frenchman Street we watched group after group of musicians pop in and out of the local clubs to try their chops out in New Orleans.

We really looked forward to our stop at the world famous



*Terrance Simien emanating the NOLA vibe to keep the good times rolling on board
Photo by © Joseph A. Rosen*

radio station WWOZ, where we were greeted with open arms by our friend, station manager Russell Shelton (we are an official simulcaster of WWOZ's broadcast of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival). The line was out the door with musical guests visiting from our cruise. LRBC promoter Roger Nabor was actually in the booth doing a live interview when we arrived.

We grabbed a quick meal of fried catfish at a cafe across the street, where we listened to some live jazz and chatted with one-man-band Randy McQuay from the cruise. We stopped by the Louisiana Music factory record store to peruse vintage vinyl and check out Kenny Neal playing live.

We came to realize that everyone had a special connection to NOLA. For Buddy Guy, New Orleans was where he'd say goodbye after his two standing-room-only shows onboard the Blues Cruise; he was headed home to Chicago, a bit further up the river. For some of the musicians, it was home – one artist told us he jumped off to do his laundry while in port. Another band member had to turn down his nephew's BBQ after eating so much delicious food on the ms Westerdam.

We headed back to the ship to enjoy the evening's entertainment against the backdrop of the lights of New Orleans. As we partied on deck, Tab Benoit's family was celebrating a wedding at nearby condos and they waved to us on ship. Rumor has it that Tab's mother told the Port Authorities not to shut down the loud music and kick the boat out this time (the last LRBC ship in port had to leave for making too much noise). Apparently they listened to her, and the band played on.

The ride back down the Mississippi by night was magical, though bittersweet. Luckily, even as we left the "Big Easy" behind, the vibe continued throughout the cruise.

Terrance Simien could be counted on to throw out tons of Mardi Gras beads during his performances, getting us in the mood with his infectious Cajun smile! The family's musical tradition continued with his lovely daughter, Marcella, who also performed. Living legend Buckwheat Zydeco showed us another side of the New Orleans musical legacy by playing the washboard and accordion.

In addition to performing numerous shows, Tab Benoit hosted the popular charity bingo to raise money for his foundation, Voices of the Wetlands. This important environmental project was featured on the ship's round-the-clock video programming, which also live broadcasted select shows on the ship.

Another documentary focused on Hurricane Katrina and featured the Soul Queen of New Orleans herself, Miss Irma Thomas. Irma had lost her own club to the floodwaters but didn't let that stop her from pushing up her sleeves and helping others during the crisis. What a far cry from the glamorous Irma Thomas we saw – a vision in white – presiding over the ship's famous Gospel Brunch.

Most poignantly, the trip was Allen Toussaint's farewell to New Orleans. Actually, it was one of Mr. Toussaint's last major appearances anywhere. We enjoyed a special showcase in



*Allen Toussaint and Irma Thomas reminisce with Bill Wax, founder of the B.B. King's Bluesville channel on Sirius XM, about the early years in New Orleans
Photo by © Joseph A. Rosen*

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Allen Toussaint's exceptional performances on the LRBC became even more poignant, as they were among his last. Photo by ©Joseph A. Rosen

the big showroom with Mr. Toussaint and Irma Thomas – a Q&A conducted by Bill Wax. He talked about the early days with Irma in the city as well as the post-Katrina music scene for the musicians of New Orleans.

Toussaint wrote "Mother-in-Law," "I Like It Like That," "Working in the Coal Mine" and "Southern Nights," among many other hits. He was also the producer for hundreds of recordings, among the best known include Dr. John's "Right Place, Wrong Time" and Patti LaBelle's "Lady Marmalade." We were blessed to see this "behind the scenes" gentleman taking center stage for some of his final performances. He even honored us by taking the time to do a station drop for Ozcat Radio. We were stunned and saddened to hear that this great man, this American treasure, Mister New Orleans himself, passed away on November 10, 2015, just a short time after the Blues Cruise docked.

Even though we only had one full day in New Orleans, the Blues Cruise provided the full New Orleans experience. It was a quickie, but we are virgins no more. Can't wait until the LRBC heads back to New Orleans. 🎵

Kate Martinelli is the co-founder of Ozcat Radio 89.5 FM in Vallejo, CA, and the host of The Sunny Mix radio program. She is a freelance writer, graphic and web designer, but most of all, devoted mother and grandmother. Find Ozcat Radio online at www.ozcatradio.com or tune in via smartphone.

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