



A T-shirt for sale during a benefit concert for Hurricane Katrina relief at Philadelphia's Kimmel Center

Remembering New Orleans

The city I love, the city it was — and the city I hope it will be again

BY ROD DAVIS

For many years, I had considered New Orleans my spiritual home. Sitting in the back of a Louisiana National Guard deuce-and-a-half inching wheel-well deep through the dark, foul waters of the Lower Ninth Ward a week after Katrina broke its protective levee, it was an act of will to try to remember the flooded, burning, devastated city as the place I'd always longed for and loved.

For a time, it wasn't that city I'd remembered, not at all. Uptown was flooded on one side of St. Charles Avenue, where the trolleys run. Gentilly, the Tremé, Mid-City,

Metairie — all inundated. The Lower Ninth, and St. Bernard Parish on its eastern border, became the first and maybe most stricken victims with the breaching of the levee floodwall on the Industrial Canal just a few hours after the Category 4 storm reached the city at dawn on Monday, August 29.

By Tuesday, when the floodwalls on levees at the 17th Street Canal and London Avenue also were breached, it was all over. The Big Easy, more accurately the Big Bowl because of its low-lying position within the boundaries of the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, was changed forever.

I remember that day because that's when my heart broke.

I had driven toward New Orleans on Monday evening, ostensibly to cover the storm damage and aftermath for the *San Antonio Express-News*, but my real motive was deeply personal. New Orleans had become, to me, the greatest city in the country. It was the most representative of our history, good and bad, and the only place that I really felt I could breathe creatively. Now it seemed to be dying.

Tuesday evening, unable to get into the city itself because of numerous block-

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ades, I detoured on its southern flank along the Bayou Lafourche toward Grand Isle to check on the fate of the Duets, a Cajun family I had met among the first wave of evacuees pouring outward from this 21st-century version of the Dust Bowl. Power lines and broken trees were everywhere, as were de-roofed houses and battered fishing boats.

Only a last-minute karmic twist had shifted the storm toward Biloxi, Mobile, and the unfortunate Mississippi coast. New Orleans was thus spared the "worst case scenario," it was said. But the scenario got so bad, so fast, that no one could really think of anything worse.

Tiffany Crawford, who owned a construction business in submerged Chalmette, near the site where British troops were defeated in the War of 1812, was, like most of those fleeing the hellish storm, in a state of psychological shock. Hunched over her laptop in the wee hours of Wednesday morning in a jam-packed Lake Charles hotel, she said she had owned a construction business but now couldn't even help in the cleanup. "We don't have our trucks, and we don't have our tools. We don't have anything," she said. She knew her home was wiped out, and she had no idea where she and her family might stay when the hotel bills got too high. "You're fighting for your life at this point," she said. In one hand, a forgotten cigarette burned down to her knuckles.

The "catastrophe" predicted by the National Weather Service had been so crippling that relief efforts and government coordination had broken down completely. The city was not only drowned but also seemingly abandoned.

"It's not safe," Mayor C. Ray Nagin said on Tuesday, as confusion reigned about whether and when residents could begin to return. Around the city, parishes began locking down their borders as fears of looting and dangerous conditions spread through the region.

By Friday, September 2, as I made my way slowly through the infamous horrors of the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, where thousands of heroic people were suffering and dying from neglect, I was both numb and outraged. It was a common feeling in the city that week.

In the next few days, help slowly began to arrive, and thousands were evacuated. Animals were rescued. The pumps began working and the city drained. National Guard and Army units filled the streets. Hope mixed with despair like red beans and rice.

Through it all, a phenomenon evolved that was utterly New Orleans. In the midst of the grisly daily servings of news — often so exaggerated that at one point sharks were said to be swimming on Canal Street — came endless professions of faith in the city that care, if not Katrina, forgot. You could hear it late at night from people calling into radio station WWL (870 AM), for a while the only frequency in town that was able to broadcast, looking for missing loved ones. You could hear it in the conversations of evacuees gathered around gas stations on the road, from those who stayed behind. You could see it in the way they had survived.

In the old blue-collar Irish Channel, adjacent to the Lower Garden District, Patrick McCarthy was holding out in the building he had owned for 30 years. He was high and dry from the flooding and had plenty of food and water and said he was staying to fend off looters. But he was really staying because it was his home. "It was a stupid call in the philosophical sense to stay," he said. "But I knew if a big one hit, there would be looting. So I had to stay. I stayed because there would be no one else."

Ashton O'Dwyer, a lawyer in the well-to-do Uptown area near Tulane, had dug in for the long haul and was willing to live without air conditioning, water, or other amenities. He wore shorts to stay cool, looked after his neighbors, and sometimes brought beer next door to a house temporarily rented out to some reporters.

He was one of the holdouts, the folks who didn't want to leave. I could never blame them. I even sort of understood the man in the Lower Ninth Ward who was rescued twice, and both times waded back into the flooded streets because he said his wife, whom no one had seen, was still back there. I probably won't ever forget the half-crazed look in his sleepless eyes. Like many in this city that had the highest percent of native-born residents of any in the United States, Antonio Lopez couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

So many people in New Orleans felt the same. "It's deep in the roots," said Teddy Duet, whose family finally got home almost a week after the storm made landfall. Their house in Cut Off was still standing, but it was a mess: walls infested with mold, roof partly damaged, up to \$20,000 in repairs. Without power, all the fish in the freezer had thawed. In Cajun tradition, they cooked up everything and had a feast for their neighbors on the bayou.

My first real involvement with New Orleans came years ago when I was a graduate student at LSU and took occasional forays into the city to blow off steam. One of my favorite memories is walking with my girlfriend through rainy French Quarter streets and encountering a party-hearty young man dragging a mattress, yelling, "Curb service!"

I mean, this is a city that names its streets after The Nine Muses.

It's a city where tolerance isn't a word, it's a way of life. It's a city where religions range from Baptist to Catholic to Voodoo. It even has a well-known Zen center on Camp Street, in the Central Business District, although following the spare Zen path in New Orleans must be like trying to stay sober at Galatoire's or diet at Mandina's.

Over the years, I have come to the city often. It was where I met the Reverend Lorita Gamble, initiated as an authentic Orisha Voodoo priestess and also ordained as minister of the Spiritual Church (an African-influenced Christian denomination that thrives in the city). She inspired me to write *American Voodoo: Journey Into a Hidden World*, an effort to seek out the truth of the West African religion so often unfairly caricatured and demonized.

She had grown up in the Lower Ninth Ward, lately 100 percent destroyed, and I had sought in churches and ministers there the fascinating sources of her fusion of Jesus and her African deity, Oshun. It was to that world, and those in parts of lower Uptown and New Orleans East, that I owed insights for another New Orleans book, *Corina's Way*, a novel. All devastated far beyond anything I would have dared imagine.

For a while, and even now, questions about the future of New Orleans — as in, does it have one? — were media fodder.

For me, the future of New Orleans was never in question. After all, how can a city vanish when it has never gone away?

By now, we're all familiar with the analogies — an earthquake in Kobe, Japan, a hurricane in Galveston, Texas. Each slammed by nature and yet rebuilt. Neither is exactly the same, but why should that be expected?

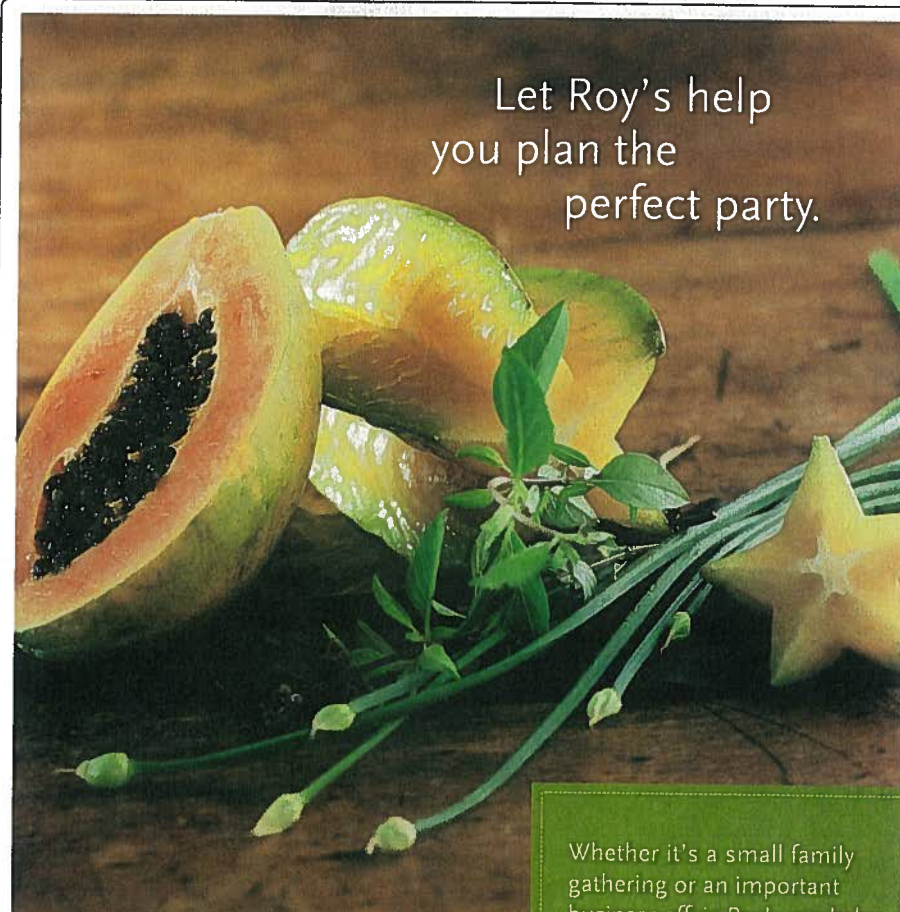
The history of the Big Easy is rich, if not always stellar, but it has never been trapped in amber. French, Spanish, and American rule pushed it this way and that. Over the years, one of the South's principal slave markets, and site of major civil rights battles in the 1960s, became a majority African-American city. Where drumming and dancing by Africans were once confined to

Congo Square emerged the cradle of jazz.

New Orleans is also a powerful center of commerce, with major ports handling most of American agricultural exports such as wheat. Oil and gas are behind much of the city's wealth, enabling it to also attain regional clout in banking, insurance, and related areas. Tourism is its mainstay, and to me there is no question tourism will rebound along with everything else.

Take the signs of hope where you will.

For me, one of the best was a post-hurricane version of the annual Southern Decadence in the French Quarter (which stayed about three-quarters dry) the Sunday following the storm. Usually a gay celebration, this year it was for anyone who had survived the storm. It was silly, it was bawdy, it was irreverent. It started at a bar on Bourbon Street that had stubbornly refused to close, and its celebrants (in tutus, grass skirts, and sombreros) danced and sang



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New Orleans had become, to me, the greatest city in the country. It was the only place that I really felt I could breathe creatively.

their way throughout the oldest part of the city. "We need to keep our morale up, too," said one of the organizers, a part-time legal assistant whose Quarter name is Jelly Sandwich.

How can you not love a city with that kind of chutzpah?

How can you not love a city with the Nevilles, the Meters, Professor Long Hair, the Jazz Vipers? That nurtured Louis Armstrong and Dr. John and Ernie K-Doe and William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams and Kate Chopin and Sherwood Anderson. Home today to writers from Richard Ford to Andrei Codrescu. With hangouts from Donna's to Delmonico's, Dooky Chase to the Napoleon House. So many more.

There is talk that spiritual forces, not just meteorology, had a hand in the waters that covered New Orleans. It may sound implausible, but not altogether so for a city in which the gods of many cultures seem to have found common (if not high) ground. Yet those same spiritual forces, augmented by human sweat and determination, will also see the city rise. Because if no man is an island, neither is a great urban culture.

"What happened here could happen to any other city," said an exhausted Captain John Pollard of a Texas Air National Guard security team manning a drawbridge access leading into the Lower Ninth Ward. Within a day of arrival, said the San Antonio firefighter, his men had seen their role transform from armed patrolling to providing food, water, and medical help to the residents who had been unable to escape.

"New Orleans will never die," one of the marchers in the Southern Decadence parade had shouted.

"I see New Orleans coming back," an emotional Mayor Nagin had said in the

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first, sleepless week, his early despair shifting to a powerful vision of resurrection and grit that earned him tremendous popularity among his constituents. "But it's going to take patience."

If there is anything that can be remotely considered a positive within all the negative from the storm — and for me there is always a yin and yang — it is to be found in the incredible scope of the post-Katrina Diaspora. Within two weeks after the storm, evacuees were said to be found in every state.

Call it the New Orleans-ization of America.

Where there was only tuna melt, there is now jambalaya. Where there was karaoke, there is second line jazz. Where there was dullness, there is style. Any place with evacuees is resonating with the city's language and personality.

Maybe my decades-long frustration at not being able to move to the city is moot. The city has moved to me. To us.

Come February, towns across America that have only watched Mardi Gras will have carnivals of their own. Come spring, other versions of Jazz Fest may erupt. For as long as the displaced find shelter or new starts in the rest of the country, they will add spice to this American life.

Most want to get home as soon as conditions permit. To them lies a task the extent of which is unknown, as Hurricane Rita so quickly reminded. It is a burden they will bear, a triumph in which they will rejoice, as have generations of New Orleanians since the founding of the city in 1718.

I mourn her, I celebrate her. I was privileged to be with her in her torment and wretchedness, and I will be there when she once again stands proud and soothes the ache in my chest. ©

Rod Davis is travel editor of the *San Antonio Express-News* and author of *Corina's Way* and other works.

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