

# New Orleans CITYBUSINESS

## Scaling Back

by Emilie Bahr

It's a timeworn truism among observers of the New Orleans music scene that musicians here often have to leave the city to earn a living wage.

That dictum rang true for New Orleans trumpeter Troy Sawyer long before Hurricane Katrina, so much so that Sawyer, now 29, was considering heading for New York when the 2005 storm struck.

"I felt as though I needed to get away to broaden my perspective and to reach more people — and get paid more," he said. "In New Orleans, you don't really get paid that much. There's so much talent down here that people just give it away for free."

Katrina caused Sawyer to reconsider.

"I don't like to be forced to do anything I don't want to do," he said. "I evacuated to Texas and evacuated to New York, and I felt as though I had to come back to New Orleans."

But when he first returned to the city, he wasn't performing. Instead, with so many music venues shuttered, he worked in construction to make ends meet.

Four years later, the picture is improving for Sawyer and other musicians. A recent report by musicians aid group Sweet Home New Orleans finds the number of performance venues expanding, locals' attendance at live shows holding strong and that musicians have experienced modest gains in performance fees compared with last year.

Even so, income-earning opportunities on the whole remain below what they were before Katrina. The average Sweet Home client now earns less than \$18,000 a year, the group says. A smaller population, higher cost of living and fewer visitors loom as major challenges only exacerbated by the national economic collapse.

Charles Moore, 58, said the local music business always has been characterized by feast or famine, but the boom and bust cycle has proven even more pronounced since Katrina with steady work harder than ever to come by.

Moore is a bass player and guitarist who for decades made his living playing with all variety of bands including the Neville Brothers. But many of the groups he played with before the storm have not returned.

As a result, he said he's been forced to chart a new course. Long a standard on the jazz and rock 'n' roll scenes, he has begun promoting himself as a classical guitarist and recently released his first solo CD.

"I'm going into the hole to do this," he said of his self-produced album. "But it's either this or the bottom falls out. (Classical music) was the last market I had yet to explore."

Moore recently emerged from a period he described as one of his bleakest ever. He played just two gigs last month, he said, not nearly enough to keep pace with expenses. It was an experience that left him severely demoralized and, for the first time, giving serious thought to leaving the city for good.

"I really thought I needed to get out of here," he said, adding that it was the thought of starting over again from scratch held him back.

Lately, his fortunes seem to be improving. His October calendar is filling up with gigs, several of them with his brother, Deacon John Moore. He's heading into the studio to record CDs with Wanda Rouzan and Art Neville, he said, and hopes he has reached a turning point.

"I never want to go through that again," he said of September. "I couldn't pay my bills. It was just too much."

Katrina aside, New Orleans has never been an ideal place to make a living as a full-time musician,

said Jerry Goolsby, the Hilton/Baldrige Eminent Scholar in music studies at Loyola University. Goolsby said most musicians in the city are either forced to supplement their incomes with side jobs or leave for cities with more prosperous music economies.

"It's extremely difficult for a working musician to make a living in New Orleans only playing music," Goolsby said, pointing to what he described as a dearth of music infrastructure — publishers, record labels, booking agents and managers — compared with cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Nashville, Tenn., and even Austin, Texas.

"If I'm a musician in New York City, I can make an income by playing in a recording studio during the afternoon, playing an early evening jazz ensemble in a restaurant and then playing that evening in a bar," he said.

Furthermore, he said, New Orleans musicians have a cache in New York, Los Angeles and Nashville they simply don't have at home.

"At the end of the day, I think it goes back to supply and demand. We have an overabundance of musicians and limited places for them to earn an income."

As a result, Goolsby said, "basically, as soon as somebody gets good in New Orleans, they leave."

Like Moore and Sawyer, guitarist Pierre Pichon, 41, finds it's not an overabundance of earning opportunities that keep him in New Orleans. A native of France, Pichon moved to the Crescent City in 2002 after spending several years in Austin and other U.S. cities. He has stayed longer than originally planned, having grown enamored, he said, of the rhythm and the richness of life here.

Pichon is upbeat about improvements he said have taken place lately where the local music scene is concerned, citing among these the opening of new music clubs and a gradual return of tourism to the city.

"It's only getting better every year," Pichon said. "But considering where we started, it can only get better."

For Sawyer, meantime, the post-Katrina era has brought with it a number of encouraging developments. He bought a house in the Musicians' Village development in the Upper 9th Ward, a move he said brought with it media exposure from the likes of MTV and the Travel Channel.

He has delved into film and commercial scoring for the first time and is doing some production work on the side. And he has found that with his name recognition growing, so have his opportunities for playing out of town, where he said he can make as much as four and five times the money as he does playing at home. •