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NEW ORLEANS FINEST NIGHTLIFE

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After Hours

Archival Research and Hits from the Crypt with the Creole String Beans

Ian McNulty

The Historic New Orleans Collection (THNOC) is about exploring and interpreting the history and culture of Louisiana. In a somewhat different way - less scholarly, far more danceable - so is the music of the Creole String Beans.

Anyway, that's the connection I've drawn after pondering the initially-quizzical pairing coming up this Friday of THNOC, an august museum and research center, with the Creole String Beans, one of the most fun party bands playing around New Orleans right now.

The last time I saw the Creole String Beans, they were blazing through a sax- and innuendo-laden set at Jazz Fest. The last time I visited THNOC, it was showing centuries-old maps and documents from the Spanish exploration of Louisiana, priceless artifacts loaned out by an archive in Seville.

But THNOC these days also hosts its ongoing Concerts in the Courtyard series, when the center opens the courtyard of its splendid French Quarter facility for an early Friday night of music and drinks.

The featured performers range widely. Recently it was classic jazz clarinetist and educator Dr. Michael White while earlier it was the Tin Men, "the world's premier sousaphone, guitar, washboard trio," a self-applied title no one is likely to challenge.

But the Creole String Beans seem like an especially inspired choice. Here is a band that does its own archival digging, bringing back hits from the glory days of New Orleans R&B and Swamp Pop, that polyglot, only-in-Louisiana blend of Cajun, country, R&B and rock-and-roll that cropped up in the late 1950s. Like a form of found-object art, the band mixes these salvaged, from-the-crypt covers with their own originals composed in the same spirit.

The band was formed back in 2003 by bassist/singer Rob Savoy, a veteran of the Bluerunners and Cowboy Mouth, and guitarist/singer Rick Olivier, an accomplished photographer and a musician rumored to have hundreds upon hundreds of songs at instant, uncanny recall. They're joined by Brian Rini on organ and piano, Bryan Barry on drums and then Derek Huston on baritone sax and Travis Blotsky on tenor sax, a brass duo known as "the Terrytown Horns."

The Creole String Beans are big on the local party circuit, especially neighborhood festivals and weddings where the New Orleans nostalgia in their sets finds a reliably susceptible audience. They nail the recently revived Allen Toussaint/Ernie K-Doe number "Here Come the Girls," for instance.

Their original material is a lot of fun too, especially with the way it mines Louisiana's peculiar anthropology. There's "Funky Spillway," honoring the Bonnet Carre Spillway, the engineering wonder of last resort to save New Orleans from a runaway river, and "St. Gabriel," going out to the women's prison of the same name up in Iberville Parish, the old stomping grounds of Rick Olivier himself. Perhaps the deepest dive, though, is a tribute song to local horror show host Morgus the Magnificent and his obscure, campy New Orleans-shot 1962 movie "The Wacky World of Dr. Morgus," the plot of which the Creole String Beans reprise in their song "Instant People." When you're plumbing this far into New Orleans lore, no spoiler alert is necessary.

On a related music note, it was the Historic New Orleans Collection that published local author Ben Sandmel's most recent work, "Ernie K-Doe: R&B Emperor of New Orleans," a biography of the late but still larger-than-life New Orleans singer. The Los Angeles Times called Sandmel's book "a deeply researched and exquisitely drawn portrait" of K-Doe and "his relationship to the city that made him who he was."

You can check it out at the Collection's gift shop between Creole String Bean numbers.

Concerts in the Courtyard Series
The Historic New Orleans Collection
533 Royal St., 504-523-4662
Friday, June 15; 6-8 p.m.; rain or shine
Doors open at 5:30 p.m.

Admission is \$10, or free for THNOC members, and includes three complimentary drinks.

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