

## **Preservation Hall Jazz Band brings a “Creole Christmas”**

By Jim Beal Jr., December 6, 2013

SAN ANTONIO — **When the Preservation Hall** Jazz Band hits downbeat Wednesday night, the octet will bring five decades of playing New Orleans sounds plus something different.

Brand-new music.

The traditional jazz band, based in Preservation Hall on St. Peter Street in New Orleans' French Quarter, is on a doubleheader tour, celebrating “Creole Christmas” and the release of “That's It,” the band's first album of all-original music.

“There's a lot of responsibility leading a band that's been around for five decades,” said bassist/sousaphonist Ben Jaffe, whose parents established Preservation Hall in 1961. Jaffe, 42, is the band's music director.

“Doing an album of original material weighed heavily on my shoulders because it was a risk,” Jaffe said. “But it's not something that was concocted in a laboratory. It's a reflection of who we are as a band today. Our biggest responsibility is to our tradition and to furthering our tradition.”

The 11-track “That's It,” produced by Jaffe and My Morning Jacket's Jim James, features songs that would have fit well on any of the band's albums. It includes the spooky “Rattlin' Bones,” the spiritual “Dear Lord (Give Me the Strength),” the rousing title track and the romantic-meets-melancholy “August Nights.”

“The greatest compliment we've gotten on the new material is no compliment at all,” Jaffe said. “It doesn't matter that it's new material. To older fans, it's a breath of fresh air to have new songs to attach themselves to.”

The band, Jaffe, Charlie Gabriel (clarinet, vocals), Rickie Monie (piano), Clint Maedgen (saxophone, vocals), Mark Braud (trumpet), Ronell Johnson (piano, sousaphone, vocals), Freddie Lonzo (trombone, vocals) and Joseph Lastie Jr. (drums), will deliver favorites, songs from “That's It” and seasonal tunes.

“When we decided to tour during the holidays, we decided we'd try to capture the holiday spirit with songs that have meaning to the members of the band,” Jaffe said. “All the holiday songs have been played every way imaginable. People get so saturated with holiday music, they don't want to hear another version of 'Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer.'”

“One of the beauties of being a member of the Preservation Hall Jazz Band is performing with musicians whose families go back three or four generations of musicians in New Orleans. They have a lot of tradition.”

The band and Preservation Hall have long been Crescent City music torchbearers. Post-Hurricane Katrina, the band has become more than a repository of musical knowledge. The band has worked and toured overtime to preserve the culture and spread the word about New Orleans.

“We've definitely seen a resurgence in the band's popularity,” Jaffe said. “There are a multitude of factors, and a key factor was Hurricane Katrina and the impact it had on us as a city and as individuals.

“We are here today doing what we do because of rebuilding of the city. Rebuilding gave me purpose and a sense of responsibility to future generations of New Orleans musicians. That's the thing we were put on Earth to protect: our music, our legacy. You can't wash that away.”

The band has collaborated with a dizzying array of musicians, including the Blind Boys of Alabama, Steve Earle, the Del McCoury Band, Jim James and My Morning Jacket, Givers, Allen Toussaint and King Britt.

“Part of collaboration is the discovery of the purpose,” Jaffe said. “When you're working with them they come into your world and you go into their world. They're your peers. You admire them, and they admire you back. It's not always jazz musicians who have a deep appreciation for New Orleans music.”

When you listen to “That's It,” or any of the Preservation Hall Jazz Band records, or to the band live, or sit in the old church pews in Preservation Hall, you get the feeling you don't want to bet against the band being around another 50 years.

“When you grow up surrounded by these amazing performers, these people who have created something that has uplifted the entire world, it's a binding thread,” Jaffe said. “Wherever we go in the world, no matter what languages are spoken, we speak to the people through our music.”

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#### MORE INFORMATION

In concert

Who: Preservation Hall Jazz Band

When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Charline McCombs Empire Theatre, 226 N. St. Mary's St.

Tickets: \$29-\$110 at [www.artssa.org](http://www.artssa.org), 210-226-2891; \$40.85-\$126.45 through Ticketmaster