

THOSE WE'VE LOST

Bennie Pete, Bandleader Who Kept the Beat After Katrina, Dies at 45

A tuba player and the leader of the Hot 8, one of New Orleans's high-profile brass bands, he brought music to his fellow citizens in the difficult days after the storm.

By Alex Vadukul

Published Sept. 18, 2021 Updated Sept. 19, 2021

Bennie Pete, a New Orleans tuba player who co-founded and led the Hot 8, one of the city's high-profile brass bands, and dedicated himself to preserving the musical traditions of the Big Easy after Hurricane Katrina, died on Sept. 6 at a hospital there. He was 45.

His wife, Lameka Segura-Pete, said the cause was complications of sarcoidosis, an inflammatory disease, and Covid-19.

The soul of New Orleans is rooted in music. Second-line parades march for hours down its streets, with brass bands followed by dancers holding feathered parasols and sipping drinks. New Orleans honors its dead with jazz funerals that strut through town, celebrating life through a musical sacrament with the city.

Born and raised in the Upper Ninth Ward, Mr. Pete embraced this heritage. He started playing the tuba at 10 and joined a marching band in middle school. At 18, he helped bring together two brass bands, the Looney Tunes and the High Steppers, to form the Hot 8.

The Hot 8 began playing for tips on Bourbon Street and in Jackson Square, in the heart of the French Quarter. They performed outside a housing project in the Central City neighborhood, where people sat down with bags of crawfish and bottles of Abita beer to listen. Mr. Pete once found himself leading a jazz funeral for a dog.

"He was a popular dog for one of the popular musicians," he told Esquire magazine in 2014, "and they threw a big second-line parade through the streets for him. They'd make a reason to party."

By 2000, the Hot 8 had established itself as part of a vanguard of young brass bands that were upholding the jazz and funk traditions of New Orleans yet playing with a contemporary sound. The Hot 8's repertoire included songs by the Specials and Marvin Gaye, and the band incorporated rap and hip-hop into its style. The musicians led second lines on Sundays for social aid and pleasure clubs; crowds formed at night to watch them play in bars in the Treme neighborhood.

After Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, the preservation of New Orleans's musical heritage became a matter of serious concern. Countless musicians were displaced and evacuated, and longstanding jazz and blues clubs were left in ruin. Mr. Pete and a few bandmates ended up in Atlanta.

Two months later, the Hot 8 regrouped to lead the first jazz funeral in New Orleans after the storm. The band played with donated instruments, and members of the procession wore salvaged pieces of finery. The parade, which honored a celebrated chef, Austin Leslie, started at Pampy's Creole Kitchen in the Seventh Ward before ambling to the former site of Chez Helene, where a sign greeted the marchers: "We won't bow down. Save our soul."



“Bennie wanted to play for these people to give them that New Orleans love that was missing,” his wife said of his activities after Katrina. “He and the band got busy spreading the culture around.” Maria Zbaska

As despair weighed on the city, the Hot 8 began performing at evacuation shelters and emergency medical centers. They drove around in a van, stopping to jam for crowds until little second lines formed, before heading to another part of town. It wasn't long before they became local heroes.

“Bennie wanted to play for these people to give them that New Orleans love that was missing,” his wife said. “He and the band got busy spreading the culture around.”

When Spike Lee learned of the Hot 8, he decided to feature them in his 2006 documentary about New Orleans, “When the Levees Broke.” The film brought them national attention. They were signed to a British record label, toured with Lauryn Hill and performed with Mos Def. They appeared on the HBO show “Treme” and recorded with the gospel group the Blind Boys of Alabama.

But even as music returned to New Orleans after the storm, the Hot 8 endured more misfortune. Their snare drummer, Dinerral Shavers, was shot dead in his car in December 2006. It was only the latest in a series of tragedies for the band.

In 1996, the trumpet player Jacob Johnson was shot in the head at his home. In 2004, the trombonist Joseph Williams was killed in an encounter with the police. And just after Katrina, the trumpeter Terrell Batiste lost his legs in a road accident.

Mr. Shavers's murder especially rattled Mr. Pete.

“I wanted to move,” he told OffBeat magazine. “I was tired of New Orleans. I felt like I would be the one next.”

Ultimately he resolved to stay, and the Hot 8 recorded an album to honor their fallen bandmates.



The Hot 8 Brass Band in 2017. From left: Christopher Cotton, Tyrus Chapman, Anthony Brooks, Harry Cook, Mr. Pete, Larry Brown, Alvarez Huntley and Andrew Calhoun. Melissa Fargo

Released in 2012, “The Life & Times Of ...” was nominated for a Grammy Award as best regional roots music album. The group released “Tombstone,” a sister album also based on the theme of remembrance, the next year. The Hot 8 was also featured on a 2015 compilation album, “New Orleans Brass Bands: Through the Streets of the City,” on the Smithsonian’s Folkways label.

“Everything kind of worked,” Mr. Pete told Esquire. “Yeah, we are the Hot 8 who went through these things, but we’re still here, and this is who we are after the storm.”

Bennie Gerald Pete Jr. was born on July 10, 1976. His father was a maintenance worker in the Garden District. His mother, Terry (Thomas) Pete, was a homemaker.

As a boy, Bennie attended a Baptist church in the Seventh Ward, where his maternal grandfather was pastor, and he danced in the aisles as he sang gospel music. He graduated from Alcée Fortier High School in 1994.

In addition to his wife, Mr. Pete is survived by three sons, Brannon, Brennon and Bennie III; two stepdaughters, La’Shae Joseph and Laila Trask; and two sisters, Yvete and Terneisha Pete.

Over the last decade, the Hot 8 began touring regularly in Europe; in New Orleans, the band performed on the vaunted stages of Tipitina’s and the annual Jazz & Heritage Festival.

Mr. Pete suffered a seizure in 2014 and was diagnosed with sarcoidosis. In 2018, he underwent surgery for prostate cancer. During the lockdown, his health deteriorated, and he lost 100 pounds. When the Hot 8 recently resumed their Sunday residency at the Howlin’ Wolf, Mr. Pete didn’t join them onstage.

In the days after his death, brass bands in New Orleans mourned him with music. They led second lines through Treme, Central City and the Garden District. The soulful notes of “Just a Closer Walk With Thee,” a hymn played to send off the dead, echoed into the night.

Alex Vadukul is a city correspondent. He writes for Metropolitan and is a two-time winner of the New York Press Club award for city writing and a winner of the Society of Silurians medallion for profile writing. @alexvadukul

A version of this article appears in print on , Section D, Page 8 of the New York edition with the headline: Bennie Pete, 45, Big Easy Bandleader Who Kept the Beat After Hurricane Katrina

How The Times decides who gets an obituary. If you made news in life, chances are your death is news, too. There is no formula, scoring system or checklist. We investigate, research and ask around before settling on our subjects.

Help make The New York Times better: Participate in paid research

Learn more about our process.

GO