

The Times-Picayune

STRIKE UP THE

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Stoked by the music culture smoldering in New Orleans, school marching bands are ready to set Carnival afire

Tuesday, February 13, 2007

By Darran Simon

Paul Batiste wanted everything to be perfect, so he slept only a few hours the night before. He made a mental checklist as he drove from his home in Metairie to Sophie B. Wright Charter School on Sunday:

Pass out the uniforms and white gloves, keep an inventory of everything, make sure the band is calm -- and get them ready to march. His musicians couldn't help their excitement.

At Sophie B. Wright, the birth of a new tradition sparked emotions just as high.

Paul Batiste directs the first-ever marching band at Sophie B. Wright Charter School. Last year, before they had instruments, Batiste had drum student beat on drum pads and textbooks. "Marching bands, the ones that are developing, are helping the city to come back from the storm," Batiste said.

Batiste knew his musicians had been forced to prepare at warp speed, since the band started just last year. He would have them play a song over and over again. Then, he made them flip over the sheet music and play it from memory.

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Sunday would be the first of four parades, a small number compared with the likes of Xavier and St. Augustine, but it didn't matter. Sophie B. Wright now would be part of the tradition.

"Marching bands right now, the ones that are developing, are helping the city to come back from the storm," Batiste said.

Dionne Cooper's son, David, made her drive around to the houses of seven relatives the night before to let them know David, a drum major, was marching -- and they had better come see him. He had worn his marching shoes out on a day painting murals for a city program. "I have to break them in," he told her.

Cooper set the alarm for 6 a.m. to wake up David that morning. When she got up, Cooper found her son in the bathroom, already brushing his teeth. Cooper was a student at Sophie B. Wright back in the 1980s. She had marched at John McDonough from 1987 through

1989. It would be a proud day for her, too.

Conveniently, perhaps fittingly, their campus sits right on the parade route, so the students could walk to line up on Napoleon Avenue for Sunday's Carrollton parade. Batiste hugged a parent volunteer at the school for luck and followed after his band. They would march in an hour, about noon. "Stay in line," Batiste told them. He knows a thing or two about music. He is part of the Batiste Brothers Band, which plays a mix of funk, jazz and R&B.

Alonzo Cyprian, 13, kept track of the time with his orange digital watch. "Two minutes to 11:30," he yelled out to no one in particular. "You heard me," said Alonzo, who plays the trumpet, trying to make sure it sunk in. He and his fellow musicians sat on the grass or knelt on one knee. A few munched on chocolate provided by a parent. Another parent squirted water in the mouths of thirsty musicians. Alonzo stopped watching the clock after noon. It was now about 12:30 p.m., 30 minutes after their start time. The call came a few minutes later. The band filed out between Oktoberfest and Indianapolis 500 floats. "Left, left, left, right, left," Batiste said, watching his musicians walk down Napoleon.

"We have to work as hard as we can to get the music back," Batiste said, "and what better way than to carry a banner and march with pride for the city.

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The New York Times

In New Orleans, Bands Struggle to Regain Footing

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Lee Celano for The New York Times

Members of the St. Augustine Marching 100 dressed for the Krewe d'Etat parade in New Orleans last week.

[HYPERLINK "http://travel.nytimes.com/travel/guides/north-america/united-states/louisiana/new-orleans/overview.html?inline=nyt-geo"](http://travel.nytimes.com/travel/guides/north-america/united-states/louisiana/new-orleans/overview.html?inline=nyt-geo) \o "Go to the New Orleans Travel Guide." [NEW ORLEANS](#), Feb. 19 — When the first Mardi Gras after Hurricane Katrina took place last year, New Orleanians felt something vital was missing: the strutting steps and triumphal horns of the city's proud, immensely competitive high school bands marching between the floats

The reason was obvious: Nearly all the city's schools were still shut, and most of the students had been evacuated. This year fewer than a third of the public schools in New Orleans have reopened — many more are due this fall — and much of the city's old population remains dispersed. But some of the top high school bands are back: a rare, heartening sign not only for the parades but also for the long-term vitality of New Orleans culture.

“Music is New Orleans, and marching bands are part of every phase of our city's life,” said Allen T. Woods, the principal of Frederick A. Douglass High School in the hard-hit Ninth Ward. His school's band was booked for two parades in this Mardi Gras season, which began on Feb. 10. The members are wearing matching warm-up suits, since band uniforms are still on order. But they are marching.

But music has not been a priority for New Orleans schools struggling

to reconstruct buildings and entire academic programs. Paul Batiste, the band director of the Sophie B. Wright Charter School, had his band practicing on what he could afford from his own pocket — just the mouthpieces for trumpets and clarinets — until instruments were provided by private groups, including the Tipitina’s Foundation and Mr. Holland’s Opus. FEMA has also supplied instruments to some schools, among them Douglass High School in the Ninth Ward.