

American Way

February 2020





Tarriona "Tank" Ball on a balcony at The Soniat House Hotel in the French Quarter

LOCAL TAKES

NEW ORLEANS

FIVE NOTABLE LOCALS SHOW US HOW TO DO *THEIR TOWN, THEIR WAY*

A geographer once wrote that New Orleans is a place both impossible and inevitable. Hacked from the dank subtropical forest by French explorers in 1718, it was ruled by both France and Spain before becoming America's wealthiest 19th-century city. A crucial port, it attracted a strange stew of pirates, aristocrats and frontiersmen, and was tragically a market for slavery. Today, the Creole mingling of cultures—African and Native, Caribbean, European and Asian—permeates the city's food, architecture and people, resulting in a vibe only the Crescent City can conjure. This month, as Mardi Gras kicks into high gear, five locals show us the hidden gems—from long-lost cocktails and avant-garde seafood to groundbreaking art—of this irrepressible, irreplaceable city.

Words **BOYCE UPHOLT**
Photography **G L ASKEW II**

New Orleans

Escape in the Bywater

NINA COMPTON
CHEF AND
RESTAURATEUR

WHEN NINA COMPTON OPENED **Bywater American Bistro** in 2018, she decided to make the restaurant a down-home affair—literally. It sits at the foot of the apartment building where she lives with her husband and business partner, Larry Miller. The couple rushed into New Orleans in 2015 just months before opening their first restaurant, **Compère Lapin**, in the Warehouse District, and they picked the building as temporary quarters, just until they found a house they liked. But then they fell in love with the **Bywater**, a former working-class enclave turned bohemian outpost abutting the river two miles downstream of the French Quarter.

It's a place that feels like a neighborhood, Compton tells me over beer and broccoli-rabe pizza at **Pizza Delicious**, a New York-style pizzeria a few blocks down from her home, "because it is a neighborhood. It's no frills. Nobody dresses up. It's just, We are who we are, and that's it." The whole premise of her restaurants is to sustain that welcoming feel, as much for locals as for tourists. "Once you get the locals on your side, that's all you really need," she tells me.

As if on cue, a woman at the next table—out for pizza with a gaggle of family—leans over and tells Compton that she celebrated her birthday at one of her restaurants. "It was wonderful," she says. "To die for." Compton thanks her with a wide grin.



Clockwise from above:
Nina Compton in
her **Compère Lapin**
restaurant; live
music at **Bacchanal**;
seared tuna at **Bywater**
American Bistro

Compton, who was raised in Saint Lucia and worked through the culinary hierarchies of New York and Miami, was selected as fan favorite on season 11 of *Top Chef* and named Best Chef: South by the James Beard Foundation in 2018. She says her own 40th birthday celebration consisted of an oversized pie here at **Pizza Delicious**. "When I'm off, I just



want to lounge," she says. "I just keep it really low-key." She'll put on records and eat takeout Chinese, or slip out to wander the streets.

Though the **Bywater** is still soundtracked by the whistle of passing freight trains and the moans of barges on the muddy river, the brightly painted houses—classic New Orleans shotguns and Creole cottages—have surged in value over the past decade, bringing demographic change, too. Tourists have discovered the area; at night, the line outside **Bacchanal**—a neighborhood institution that is part wine shop, part gourmet kitchen, part jazz patio—often winds around the block. Compton tells me she likes to go midday, instead, when it's

quiet. She'll drink a bottle of wine while listening to a local man with the voice of an angel, Raphael Bas, sing old French songs. "People think that New Orleans is just one big party all the time," Compton says. "It is, but there's more to it, too."

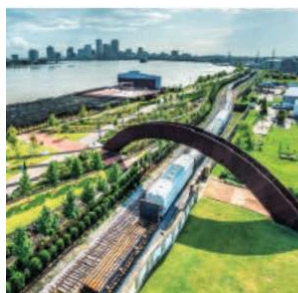
Still, the neighborhood's old spirit remains evident. "During Mardi Gras, it's ready to burst," Compton says. The day starts early, as locals, bedecked in artful costumes of satin and feathers, gather to pilgrimage into the French Quarter. Many participants in the procession, known as the St. Anne Parade, carry the ashes of loved ones, which are set adrift in the Mississippi River—a tradition that began to honor gay residents lost to the AIDS epidemic.

We walk along **Bywater** blocks—a tapestry of homes and pocket parks, art galleries and eateries such as brunch hotspot **Elizabeth's Restaurant**—before encountering **Bargain Center**, a thrift store in a cluttered warehouse. "We should go in!" Compton says. "It's fun!" She once found a 1960s wedding dress here while shopping for Mardi Gras costumes. After perusing >



TOP RIGHT: COURTESY OF BACCHANAL;
BOTTOM RIGHT: DENNY CLIBERT

New Orleans



Left: The Rusty Rainbow bridge
Right: Elizabeth's Restaurant



ESTHER ROSE
MUSICIAN

Look at the pen and ink drawings at Scene by Rhys Fine Art, featuring the work of a fascinating artist who has been drawing our music scene for many years. Then go out two-stepping. We have a small but steady Americana scene: Mondays at St. Roch Tavern and Tuesdays at The All-Star Country Jamboree.

vintage fashion finds, fine china and antique silverware, we head toward the river, climbing over the train tracks on an iron pedestrian bridge known as the **Rusty Rainbow** to reach the riverfront. The wharves here were replaced in 2014 with **Crescent Park**, a long, narrow stretch of green lined with benches and overlooks, where Compton often walks her dogs and visits the weekly farmers market. We walk the length of the park, until we stand in the shadow of her



apartment building. Someone—rumors point to acclaimed artist Banksy—has spray-painted graffiti along its roofline: “YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL,” it says.

Soon Compton will have to return there, to her kitchen, to whip up food for friends and neighbors. But for now she's looking west, towards the downtown towers, which are being gilded by the setting sun. “It's so perfect here,” she says, “You can really just get away, escape.” ➤

“PEOPLE THINK THAT NEW ORLEANS IS JUST ONE BIG PARTY, BUT THERE'S MORE TO IT.”

WHERE TO STAY



Historic Elegance

Hotel Monteleone

Dating back to 1886, this storied family-owned hotel in the French Quarter revives the indulgent grandeur of the past with whimsical wallpaper, lavish chandeliers and gilded ceilings. Its rotating Carousel Bar whips up classic cocktails that'll spin you 'round.

hotelmonteleone.com



New Traditions

The Higgins Hotel

This World War II-themed hotel might've opened in the fall, but era-appropriate details, such as General George S. Patton's piano and an airplane propeller hanging in the rooftop bar, nod to the 1940s. However, the 55-inch flat-screen TVs are a welcome modern convenience.

higgshotelnola.com



Hallowed Grounds

Hotel Peter & Paul

Nestled in the Marigny, this forsaken Catholic school, church and rectory was converted into a 71-room hotel in the fall of 2018. The clawfoot tubs, wrought-iron canopy bed frames and stained-glass windows provide an authentic touch, while the Elysian bar slings sinful stuff.

hotelpeterandpaul.com

TOP LEFT: ADAM; ESTHER ROSE PORTRAIT BY RUSH JACOB; BOTTOM LEFT TO RIGHT: COURTESY OF HOTEL MONTELEONE; JEFFREY JOHNSON; COURTESY OF HOTEL PETER & PAUL

The Bayou, Past and Present

LANCE NACIO
FISHERMAN

LANCE NACIO HAS BAYOU credentials. His great-grandfather, a Filipino immigrant, was smuggled into a Louisiana fishing village inside a barrel. Nacio spoke Cajun French before he learned English. Now, though, he has fewer and fewer people with whom to speak that tongue. "It's kind of like our coastline—everything is being eroded away," he tells me as we pull up at the Bayou Terrebonne Waterlife Museum in Houma, a small city that rises amid the low-lying marshes and swamps an hour southwest of New Orleans. Nacio points to a photo of a trapping camp, a wooden box on stilts above a marsh. It's the kind of place where his family used to hunt muskrat and nutria; he's brought me here to show me these "true facts and culture." For a lively example of bayou life both past and present, the docent recommends the Jolly Inn, Houma's famous dance hall, which on Friday nights features a traditional Cajun band, complete with a washboard and a fiddler, stirring patrons to the dance floor for waltzes and the Cajun two-step. If we weren't on our way to the city with a load of fresh fish, it'd be worth a stop.

Up the road, we pull in for lunch at Spahr's Seafood restaurant, an old gas station converted into a glassed-in café where the always packed dining room overlooks the swamps. As we devour half-size orders of the massive catfish chip platters, Nacio explains the



Clockwise from above: Lance Nacio on his property; his two boats; softshell crab over pasta and lemon-crab cream sauce at Spahr's Seafood; fresh shrimp from Nacio's fleet

"man-made disasters" affecting his world: River levees keep floods from delivering fresh mud to the local wetlands, which naturally sink under their own weight. Oil and gas canals have shredded habitats, speeding up the pace of the loss. Meanwhile, competition from India and China has held the price of shrimp down, prompting Nacio to diversify his catch and find new markets for a wider range of species. A haul might include anything from grouper to less traditional fare such as sheepshead and American conger eel. "I'm forced to do the things I do because of globalization—the way shrimp have become a commodity," he says. "I'm trying to make it better for the next generation."

We drive along Bayou Terrebonne toward New Orleans, where Nacio will deliver his catch—at one point, he nods to



his own fishing boat, idling slowly, on a return trip from purchasing nearly 5,000 gallons of gasoline—past signs advertising local citrus and Cajun sausage and, at one point, the "world's largest collection of knives-swords-daggers." There are cow pastures and lush marshes, the trees draped in shawls of Spanish moss, then canals and pumping stations. Finally, we exit the highway into the shadow of the Superdome.

Nacio's grandfather and father were each shrimpers. But ever since he deputized his 30-year-old son as the fishing captain for the Anna Marie Shrimp company, Nacio has become more a businessman. Direct sales—to chefs and food co-ops and farmers markets—have become key. He has a core clientele of adventurous chefs who, by text message, lay claim to the strange fish that appear in his nets, species little known—for now at least—to consumers used to a narrow and sometimes overfished list.

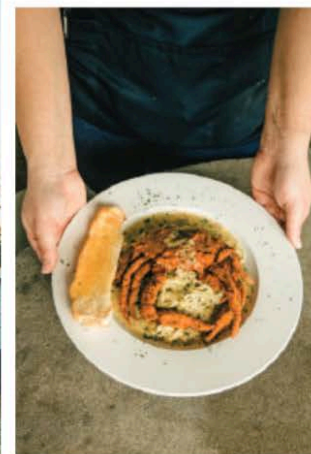


CYNDI NGUYEN
CITY COUNCIL

Vietnamese culture has had an important presence in New Orleans for almost 40 years. I always send people to Ba Mien, a restaurant that offers a taste of true Vietnamese food. And to Dong Phuong Bakeshop, famous for its king cake and the winner of a James Beard Award.

In rapid succession, we hit some of the city's most acclaimed restaurants: Pêche, a sleek, award-winning seafood hall; then Carmo, an innovative tropical café. At Marjle's Grill, a funky, buzzy Vietnamese-meets-Southern café, chef and co-owner Marcus Jacobs unpacks 50 pounds of blue runner. He plans to serve it raw tonight, topped with a spicy oil—a treat Nacio sometimes stops to enjoy over beers at the end of a long, busy day.

Jacobs keeps digging through the ice, seeking today's real prize: a 3-foot American conger eel. He grins to his kitchen staff as its long body unfurls. "I learned my lesson," he says. "When the text comes, jump on it." What would he do with it? He wasn't sure yet. He just knew he wanted it—to give diners something new and special. Nacio grins at his client's zeal. "We rely on each other," Nacio says. He knows his bayou homeland can't survive without this city—and it, in turn, depends on the bounty of the swamps. >



ADVENTUROUS CHEFS LAY CLAIM TO STRANGE FISH BY TEXT MESSAGE.

New Orleans

A Pool of Genius in Central City

L. KASIMU HARRIS
WRITER AND
PHOTOGRAPHER

THE MUCH BALLYHOODED RESTAURANT **Heard Dat Kitchen** sits southwest of the Superdome amid the residential goings-on of **Central City**, dubbed by the local newspaper the “forsaken heart” of New Orleans. Jazz legends Buddy Bolden and Kid Ory lived here, as did iconic pianist Professor Longhair and rapper Master P. Now, though, many of the buildings are abandoned. Nonetheless, **Heard Dat**, built inside an old bodega, attracts foodies from across the city.

“I’ve brought James Beard Award winners here and they’ve loved it,” says L. Kasimu Harris. The writer and photographer, sharply dressed in faux fatigues, grins as he digs into the **Mardi Gras Mambo**—a filet of fish with crawfish cream sauce, served atop rich macaroni and cheese.

This month, images from Harris’ “Vanishing Black Bars & Lounges” series—all shot in his native New Orleans—will appear as part of an exhibition at **Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art** in Bentonville, Arkansas. After the food, he tours me through the bright murals that mark family-owned drinking establishments like the **Purple Rain Lounge** and **Sportsman’s Corner**. Other landmarks—like the **Dew Drop Inn**, where Ray Charles, Sam Cooke and Otis Redding all played—are now in ruins. “After the building is gone—so too is the essence,” Harris says.



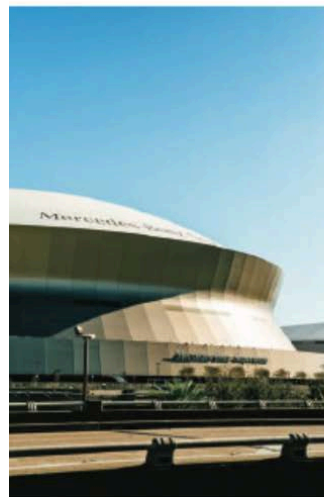
Above: L. Kasimu Harris in Central City
Right: Heard Dat Kitchen’s Mardi Gras Mambo

When Harris first visits the bars he documents, he usually has no connections. “It’s like walking into the cafeteria for the first day of high school,” he says. “But if you sit long enough, someone’s going to welcome you in.” His work focuses on underrepresented stories in New Orleans and beyond, and especially on the city’s “pool of black genius”—the food and the music, both justly famous, but also its elaborate social traditions.

Central City, Harris notes, is an epicenter of local black culture, especially on **Fat Tuesday**. The massive floats of the **Krewe of Rex** parade—one of the city’s most



TOP RIGHT: COURTESY OF BARREL PROOF



Left: Mercedes-Benz Superdome
Right: Barrel Proof



MAURICE CARLOS RUFFIN
NOVELIST

I tell visitors to get out of the French Quarter to eat. Try a local favorite of mine in Mid-City called **Neyow’s** for Creole cuisine or catch the streetcar uptown for Vietnamese at **Magasin** or Latin fusion at **Sarita’s Grill**.

expensive and lavish spectacles—will pass just a few blocks away; here, though, “tribes” of Black Masking Indians will march and chant and bang tambourines, wearing sumptuous regalia of beads and feathers.

Even before **Mardi Gras** day, visitors can experience this tradition on Sunday nights throughout the winter, when the various tribes practice at neighborhood bars. Right now, though, just after lunch, the bars are closed, so Harris and I head to the nearby **Warehouse District**, just upstream of the French Quarter, to visit the **Ogden Museum of Southern Art**, which is hosting an exhibition of paintings by William Christenberry, another artist who documented disappearing Southern locales. Across the street, at the **Contemporary Arts Center of New Orleans**, we bump into Harris’ friend Carla Williams at her pop-up retail shop, **Material Life**. Harris admires a pair of sneakers, and Williams says they were designed by the rapper **André 3000**—too bad they’re too small.

Once happy hour arrives, we settle in at **Barrel Proof**, quite different from the lounges Harris documents: Five years old, with a carefully casual aesthetic, it’s



owned by one of the city’s premier restaurant groups. But New Orleans has always been diverse—and needs all kinds of watering holes, Harris says. Besides, he’s something of a bourbon aficionado, and now he’s scouring the extensive backbar for unfamiliar bottles. Around us, the bar is filling quickly—but this is New Orleans, so we open up space, inviting new, unmet friends to join us at the counter. >

THE CITY NEEDS ALL KINDS OF WATERING HOLES.

SECRET GARDEN

A sixth-generation New Orleanian shows us around the Garden District’s oak-lined streets and historic mansions

Leanne Sarco, a guide with **Tours by Locals**, traces her roots back six generations, to the 1830s, when her great-great-great-grandfather arrived from France. The city was growing, and many of the new arrivals did not want to live alongside the old French-Creole population. So, after beginning our tour on the banks of the Mississippi in the French Quarter, we climb aboard the streetcar and rattle upriver to see what they built.

We end up afoot in the Garden District, one of the most lushly green areas of New Orleans—and one of the most extensive collections of historic mansions in the South. Sarco calls attention to the small—and sometimes spooky—details incorporated into

the architecture. At a mansion once owned by Anne Rice, the author of *Interview With the Vampire*, a leaf-and-flower pattern that studs the wrought-iron fence looks at first glance like a series of skulls.

Eventually we wind our way to **Lafayette Cemetery No. 1**. Still actively used today, it’s the final resting place for 7,000 souls. “But there’s a lot of life in here,” Sarco says to me as we stroll through the gates and past its ornate, European-style, aboveground tombs. Magnolias and live oaks line the walkways. Grasses sprout from the cracks. In swampy New Orleans, life is irrepressible, and that is the heart of its charm.

toursbylocals.com

New Orleans

Singing on the Streets in the Marigny and 7th Ward

TARRIONA "TANK" BALL
POET AND MUSICIAN

AS TARRIONA BALL—BETTER known to most in New Orleans as "Tank"—revs up her electric scooter and zips past Jackson Square in the French Quarter, the wind pulls tears from her eyes. "This is beautiful!" she shouts, before triumphantly announcing to the pedestrians what she'd learned just hours before: Along with her band, Tank and the Bangas, who fuse rap and spoken-word poetry with over-the-top funkiness, she's been nominated for a Grammy. "It makes it feel more real when you shout it from a bike," she yells.

Ball, her Afro pinned back, is dressed in purple and gold corduroy—somewhat casual, really, compared to the elaborate dresses she sometimes wears on stage. But after a long year on tour, this is a precious day to relax.

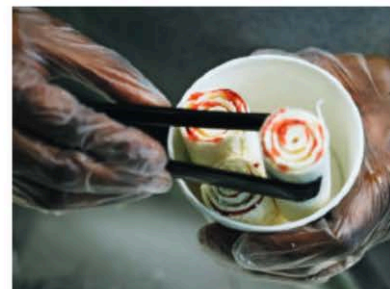
We whiz to the Marigny, a quiet and prosperous residential neighborhood just east of the French Quarter where for lunch we opt for classic New Orleans cooking at *Morrow's*, one of the city's most prominent black-owned restaurants. Over big bowls of creamy crawfish pasta, I ask her to walk me through the perfect schedule for her rare days off. "We doing it," she says, grinning widely.

We've timed our early lunch intentionally. "Because when it's late at night, or weekends—forget about it," Ball says. "Forget about it!" The line can wrap around the block.

Clockwise from above: Tarriona "Tank" Ball in the French Quarter; Jackson Square; a classic house in the Marigny; Thai rolled ice cream at Freezy Street

Ball was born in New Orleans and spent much of her youth in a house just a few blocks away. She talks about the city as a "beautiful-ugly" place, spiritual and historical and unlike anywhere else. At one point, she compares it to an "old pot"—one of those family cast-iron hand-me-downs. "It's had a lot of red bean juice," she says. "It's got a lot of seasoning in it, you know? The hope is to keep all of that alive, with the city changing so much."

Case in point: after lunch, we cross St. Claude Avenue and walk



TOP: GETTY IMAGES; TOP RIGHT: BILL KEARNEY

to the house that used to belong to her grandmother. "Music Street, baby!" she sings as we step past the sidewalk tiles that identify the street. She points out a school that, according to her mother, her family helped integrate. At the house, which is no longer in the family, a contractor is chipping away the paint. The 7th Ward, as this neighborhood is known, is in the process of gentrifying.

Today, though, is a celebration. First, we swing by *Freezy Street* for Thai rolled ice cream, where our chosen flavors are flattened into frozen sheets and then >

"NEW ORLEANS HAS GOT A LOT OF SEASONING IN IT. THE HOPE IS TO KEEP ALL OF THAT ALIVE."



rolled up, forming yummy tubes. Then we head to **Studio Be**, in the Bywater neighborhood, where the band convenes—greeting one another with hops and screams and joyful hugs—for a quick interview with the local news.

After the interview, Ball takes a moment to explore the studio, an old warehouse repurposed as the gallery of Brandon “BMike” Odums. Oversized portraits of black writers and artists and leaders radiate within its cavernous rooms. Ball reads aloud one of the graffitied slogans: “They tried to bury us. They didn’t know we were seeds.” I love that,” she says.

As we return to the gift shop, we bump into Odums, who offers a congratulatory hug. She finds a T-shirt to add to her collection: “Power to the People,” it says, in the colorful scrawl of a child. Odums explains that it was the result of a school art project; the teacher had asked the students to draw what they remembered after visiting the gallery. “I love that,” Ball says again, then fastens her helmet, ready to navigate the potholes and sunshine out in the beautiful-ugly streets. ➤

Above: Studio Be displaying the art of Brandon “BMike” Odums
Below: A street musician in the French Quarter



DEVIN DE WULF
ARTIST, PARADE ORGANIZER

Spend a day in a costume—and walk around. Even if it’s not Halloween or Mardi Gras, it doesn’t matter what time of year it is, New Orleanians will play along. We dress up in costume all the time; it’s just a part of the magic of our city.



Hidden Gems in the French Quarter

CHRIS HANNAH
CELEBRATED
BARTENDER

CHRIS HANNAH SERVES ME A Brandy Crusta—a boozy yet refreshing blend of cognac and citrus dramatically garnished with an entire lemon peel and a sugared rim—alongside a bowl of bone-marrow crème as we start the night at **Jewel of the South**. Hannah helped open this elegant tavern, tucked into an old French Quarter cottage, last year. It’s named for the wildly popular 1850s bar where the Brandy Crusta, one of the city’s first smash-hit drinks, was invented. After I down the delicious concoction, we slip into the dusky streets and head a few blocks deeper into the Quarter, to the spot where the cocktail was first revived a decade ago: **Arnaud’s French 75 Bar**, where Hannah worked for 14 years, eventually leading its program to a James Beard Award.

“New jackets,” he notes, admiring our host’s white tuxedo as we stroll in. After securing



Clockwise from above:
Chris Hannah outside his bar, Jewel of the South; Hannah making a Brandy Crusta; Muriel’s interior

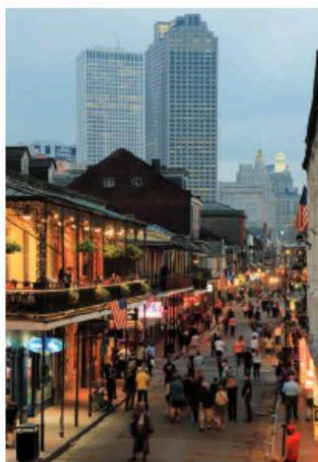
more drinks, Hannah leads me upstairs, to a little-known secret: a museum of Mardi Gras gowns that belonged to the family that launched **Arnaud’s** restaurant a hundred years ago. The gowns are outlandishly ornate, and the space a perfect respite from the bustling bar downstairs. We then weave through a labyrinth of lavish private dining rooms. Our goal, though, is thwarted: The balcony that overlooks Bourbon Street is locked tight. “It’s the only way to enjoy Bourbon Street,” he says.

In the 16 years he’s been in New Orleans, Hannah has become a student of the city, a connoisseur of its nooks and crannies, and thinks too many visitors dismiss the French Quarter as a tourist-only zone. He spends his days off winding through the ➤



BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY OF MURIEL'S

New Orleans



Above: The French Quarter at night.
Top right: The French 75 and Arnaud's Special at Arnaud's



**"I MOVED
HERE FOR
SATCHMO,
BUT I STAYED
FOR JAMES
BOOKER."**

district's narrow streets, smoking a cigar, dropping in on favored bartenders who, given his role in reviving the city's cocktail culture, all revere him as a local saint. He's got a favorite dark drinking room (the "séance lounge" at **Muriel's**); a favorite bar in which to sit and read a book after midnight (the **Pirates Alley Café**); and a favorite spot for irreverent tropical escapism—**Latitude 29**, owned by Hannah's good friend Jeff "Beachbum" Berry, a tiki scholar who has turned his obsession into one of the most heralded tiki bars in the nation.

We avoid the neon glitz and stick to rain-damp back alleys and shortcuts through ornate hotel lobbies, make a pit stop at the **Crescent City Cigar Shop**, one of Hannah's favored cigar stores, and then head to **Manolito**, a tiny Cuban-themed bar where Hannah likes to sit at the table out front and smoke. A street trumpeter warbles, sad but jaunty, and Hannah dips to drop a dollar in the man's overturned top hat; he always has



**CHRISTIAN
SCOTT ATUNDE
ADJUAH**
MUSICIAN

The Guardians Institute's Donald Harrison, Sr., Museum—named for my grandfather, a legendary New Orleans chieftain—features indigenous cultural expressions, such as Afro-New Orleanian masking traditions and the roots of improvised music.

bills on hand. Jazz is part of what brought him to New Orleans in 2004, from Baltimore, on something of a whim. "I moved here for Satchmo," he says, "but I stayed for James Booker." The one-eyed pianist—known as the "Black Liberace"—has, in the decades since his death, come to symbolize the city's flamboyant joie de vivre. Hannah, an aspiring pianist himself, loves the city's invitation to idiosyncrasy. "You can be a part of the play that is New Orleans," he says. "We're all invited."

Our last stop is **Tropical Isle**, where he wants to show me his favorite **Bourbon Street** spectacle: the Shark Attack. "Do you want the full show?" our bartender asks, before shuttling us away from the rest of the patrons. "Now we're in trouble," Hannah says, shaking his head. I won't ruin the surprise by fully describing this intersection of *Jaws* and mixology. Don't Google it; just order the messy, irreverent and delightful drink, and enjoy the play that is New Orleans. **AW**

TOP LEFT: GETTY IMAGES. BOTTOM: COURTESY OF ERIC FRAN ANDERSON