

July 16 was designated Arts and Culture Day. There was spoken word from Mike the Poet, world-renowned hip-hop journalist Davey D was there to speak, to make connections, and to do a number of interviews for international distribution, Sarah Cruse, Tamika of Yale Divinity School, award-winning New York playwright Tim Dowlin, Hip-Hop Congress president Shamako Noble, Pawnee/Seminole hip-hop rap artist Quese IMC of Oklahoma, and dozens of others.

It was New Orleans hot. Blazing. Sticky. But it was on the west side of Cleveland on July 16 where five hundred people were gathered under a tent in sprawling Lincoln Park. From the middle of the crowd, Carvell Holloway, head of music for Compton's middle schools, began to walk toward the stage playing his trumpet. The tune was only vaguely familiar. He came at the melody with angles and curves. It was unspeakably beautiful.

At the mic, Ernie Perez, front man for the Boxing Gandhis, began to sing.

Oh when the trumpet sounds the call

Oh when the trumpet sounds the call

Oh Lord I want to be in that number

When the Saints go marching in

The words were familiar, but still not the tune. Perez deliberately sang it out of time, with no resolution, to put all the focus on the lyrics. The words, he explained, were the "unknown" verses written by Louis Armstrong and brought to light by Bruce Springsteen at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival in April.

National Truth Commission - Artists and Katrina

Written by Robert ID2865

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When the rich go out and work

When the rich go out and work

Oh Lord I want to be in that number

When the Saints go marching in

When the air is pure and clean

When the air is pure and clean

Oh Lord I want to be in that number

When the Saints go marching in

When we all have food to eat

When we all have food to eat

Oh Lord I want to be in that number

When the Saints go marching in

When our leaders learn to cry

When our leaders learn to cry

Oh Lord I want to be in that number

When the Saints go marching in

All the pent-up pain and energy under the tent flowed toward the mic and Ernie had to take a step back while Carvell continued to prod things along on trumpet. Once Ernie regained his composure, he asked the crowd to clap and sing along. Now the tune became the familiar one and the response was immediate. Ernie dug deep into his gospel roots and his Apache past, tearing the song apart and putting it back together as five hundred people helped to push it to an end. The tent erupted in wild applause. If you listened closely, you could even hear the echoes of handclaps by the Gulf Coast artists who had wanted to be there but couldn't make it because they had gigs they had to play in the South--The Soul Rebels Brass Band; trombonist Craig Klein of Bonerama and also of the Arabi Wrecking Krewe, which helps local musicians rehab their flooded homes; and Mississippi rap artist David Banner, whose Heal the Hood organization has delivered aid to thousands of Katrina victims.

This was the conclusion to the "Artists and Katrina" panel at the National Truth Commission, which brought together victims of poverty from across the country to give testimony on what is really happening to millions of Americans in the richest nation on earth. The "Artists and Katrina" panel began with Tenel Curtis and Kennieth Williams describing their film Reality TV: Live From New Orleans, the first time the post-Katrina situation has been summed up by those who actually lived through it. Their film is so raw and real that they haven't been able to show it in New Orleans. The next speaker was Antoinette K-Doe, widow of New Orleans musical pillar Ernie K-Doe and owner of the legendary Mother-In-Law Lounge in New Orleans, which was destroyed by Katrina. It has been rebuilt with considerable help from the R&B star Usher and will soon re-open. "You will have a place to show your film in New Orleans," she said. "You can show it at the Mother-In-Law Lounge."

The National Truth Commission brought together Kansas farmers, Ohio leaders of the blind and deaf, Philadelphia homeless, Detroit women fighting that city's water shutoff of 40,000 families, and mothers who've had their children taken away simply because they're poor. It brought together people from housing projects and rural byways. All races and ages. Lots of languages were in the air--English, Spanish, Chinese, French, and American Sign Language. Besides the poor, there were those being pushed toward poverty in the near future--hardhat workers savaged by health care costs and formerly middle class professionals who've lost their jobs. The testimony of several dozen people was heard by a group of Truth Commissioners from around the world, including the U.S., India, Italy, Ecuador, Colombia, and Argentina (the U.S. government would not allow South Africa's Winnie Mandela into the country to join us in Cleveland). The commissioners will quickly fashion the testimony, along with their recommendations for solutions, into a document for worldwide distribution.

The energy in the tent spun people out across the park where they gathered in groups big and small. New friends and new alliances were made. The leader of a three month occupation of the office of the Tennessee governor's office traded ideas with the head of the Labor Heritage Foundation. There was a meeting of hip-hop activists, ministers, and union leaders spearheading a drive for universal health care. There was a hook-up between artists from Chicago housing projects and New Orleans housing projects with plans for a delegation to visit New Orleans soon. After an evening showing of Reality TV: Live From New Orleans, Truth Commissioner Alexis Ponce of Ecuador jumped to his feet and cried out: "If you give me a copy of that DVD, I will make sure it gets seen throughout Latin America!"

One of the most remarkable things about the National Truth Commission was its heavy emphasis on culture. As Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign director Cheri Honkala put it: "Art and culture are the most important part of our struggle. They carry us past our pain, they unite us, they spread information, and they inspire us with visions of a world without poverty."

To that end, there was a constant parade of performances in between the testimonies on July 15. And July 16 was designated Arts and Culture Day. There was spoken word from Mike the Poet, Sarah Cruse, Tamika of Yale Divinity School, award-winning New York playwright Tim Dowlin, Hip-Hop Congress president Shamako Noble, Pawnee/Seminole hip-hop rap artist Quese IMC of Oklahoma, and dozens of others. There were the gospel stylings of Togo and Donnie, there was the World Peace Drum Ensemble, and there was Joe Uehlein, union leader and professional musician. A group of Los Angeles artists assembled on stage while photographer/poet Charles "Bomani" Watson read the following statement, signed by 47 L.A. artists:

"Most people have an image that artist in Los Angeles all live like rock stars. They party it up in their mansions and travel around town in limos. It's one glittering opening, party, or shopping spree after another.

"Those of us who actually are creating in Los Angeles and trying to survive know a very different reality. We have trouble getting health care or paying for health insurance. It's a constant struggle to pay the rent, buy food, and keep a car running. We have to spend time we should use for creative pursuits hustling gigs or grants or, even worse, working one or more dead end day jobs.

"As artists, we are the conscience of the world. Through our creations we spread joy and make people think. We should not be struggling to make ends meet in the richest nation on earth."

There was an art and photography show nestled among the trees next to the tent. There was live graffiti painting. There was a mini film festival and an open mic that went on late into the night. World-renowned hip-hop journalist Davey D was there to speak, to make connections, and to do a number of interviews for international distribution. To top things off, there was a Shakespeare festival going on in the park in the evenings.

The bottom line of the National Truth Commission is this: The combination of the poor, their allies, those being pushed toward poverty, and culture isn't just a winning combination, it's the winning combination. If we embrace it on a vast scale, everything is possible.

Rock A Mole Productions (www.rockamole.com)

For more information on the National Truth Commission, including transcripts of the testimony and biographies of the commissioners go to www.economichumanrights.org

For more information on Reality TV: Live From New Orleans, go to www.d-americanzdream.com

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