

Musicians serenade city's healthcare heroes in 'Letters from the Porch' concert series

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Bruce Sunpie Barnes performs as part of the Letters from the Porch concert series supporting local musicians as they pay tribute to healthcare workers on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At a time when many New Orleans musicians can't work because of COVID-19 closures, Tulane University School of Medicine has partnered with local artists in a grass-roots effort to support the city's cultural economy while also bringing moments of joy to healthcare workers on the front lines of the pandemic.

[*Letters from the Porch: New Orleans Serenades its Medical Community*](#) launched this week featuring a series of front porch performances from area musicians and poets filmed during the past month as a love letter to doctors, nurses, residents, technicians, housekeeping, food services and other staff working long hours at area hospitals during the COVID-19 crisis.

"This series supports the work of local performing artists, while helping alleviate just a fraction of the anxiety and strain caused by COVID-19," said Dr. Anjali Niyogi, associate professor of internal medicine and pediatrics at Tulane School of Medicine. Niyogi conceived the project with free feral, a multidisciplinary artist, and Jebney Lewis, a musician and theater technician.

"I'm watching as healthcare providers are going through increasing levels of anxiety and stress and fatigue and mental health burnout. And at the same time, our musicians — who are heavily reliant on gig money — are also suffering. And so I thought that this would be a good way to combine the two needs," Niyogi said.

Artists free feral and Jebney Lewis lost several months' worth of work as a result of the pandemic, including performances at The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and the New Orleans Center of Contemporary Art.

“New Orleans is a city defined by its people. Artists, performers, and musicians draw millions of people to our city each year. The thousands of gig and hospitality workers who keep travelers happy season after season are the heart and lungs of this city,” free feral said.

Niyogi, Lewis and feral teamed up with Tulane radiation oncologist Dr. Kendra Harris, illustrator and typesetter, Jinks Holladay, cinematographers Marion Hill, Zuri Obi, and Zac Manuel, and sound editor, Holden Mauk to produce the series, which is supported by global water technology company [Xylem](#), The Kylene and Brad Beers Professorship in Social Entrepreneurship, [The Phyllis M. Taylor Center for Social Innovation and Design Thinking](#) and the [Tulane Frontline Providers Fund](#).

“This series is a testament to the New Orleans music and healthcare communities coming together, as they care for the body and feed the soul during this crisis,” said Joseph Vesey, Xylem’s chief marketing officer and chairman of [Xylem Watermark](#), the global water technology company’s social responsibility program. Vesey announced Xylem’s funding in recognition of the city’s water management board. “Xylem is proud to provide the anchor funding for this series, donated in the name of the Sewerage & Water Board of New Orleans, supporting the city’s artists and healthcare heroes.”

The project features a wide range of New Orleans musicians and poets performing from their porches or the sidewalks in front of their houses. Each episode runs between 10 and 20 minutes and is framed as a discrete letter of love and gratitude to people of the medical community, who are selflessly battling this outbreak. Featured artists include Sunpie Barnes, Sunni Patterson, Aurora Nealand, Shannon Powell, Jose Fermin, Wendi Moore O'Neal, and Kelly Love Jones.

Each segment will be screened in wellness areas in University Medical Center and Tulane Health System and released on the *Letters from the Porch* website (www.lettersfromtheporch.com) and [YouTube channel](#) every Wednesday and Friday.

Viewers will also have an opportunity to support musicians directly via individual online tipping links on the *Letters from the Porch* [website](#).

Niyogi hopes that the series also finds an audience in the larger community when so many are disconnected and gathering places are silent. She believes that music can bring people together and help ease some of the stress rippling throughout the city.

“One of the primary ways New Orleanians interact with and relate to our cultural practices is through music,” Niyogi said. “It is exciting to be able to support those who support us every day. Music to New Orleans is our heart and soul, and I can't imagine my life without it.”

Kelly Love Jones serenades healthcare workers in Letters from the Porch. The project features a wide range of New Orleans musicians and poets performing from their porches or the sidewalks in front of their homes as they salute hospital staff working long hours in the fight against COVID-19.