

Tulane composer and pianist Courtney Bryan awarded 2023 MacArthur Foundation 'genius grant'

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Composer and pianist Courtney Bryan is a 2023 MacArthur Fellowship recipient. Photo courtesy of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Tulane University composer and pianist [Courtney Bryan](#) has been named a 2023 “genius grant” recipient by the [John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation](#), one of the most coveted honors in academia, the arts and sciences.

The fellowship is awarded to talented individuals in a variety of fields who have shown exceptional originality in and dedication to their creative pursuits. Bryan, a native of New Orleans who grew up with West African, Caribbean and Central and South American musical influences through her church, creates music in conversation with various genres, including jazz and other types of experimental music, as well as traditional gospel, spirituals and hymns.

Bryan's compositions focus on bridging the sacred and the secular and explore human emotions through sound, confronting the challenge of notating the feeling of improvisation. She has given music workshops at universities across the country and has participated in and helped design programs that guide young people to improvise, compose and work with music technology.

MacArthur fellows are nominated anonymously by leaders in their respective fields and considered by an anonymous selection committee. Recipients learn of their selection only when they receive a call from the MacArthur Foundation just before the public announcement.

"Somewhere toward the end of the phone conversation it kind of hit me what was happening and that I was the recipient," Bryan said. "I work with great collaborators and colleagues, and it's easier sometimes to see in someone else what's special about them, so when they see it in you, it's really affirming. This is an affirmation of how I have been following my own path and have put integrity first, even when challenging."

Tulane President Michael A. Fitts lauded the achievements of Bryan, associate professor and the Albert and Linda Mintz Professor of Music in Tulane's School of Liberal Arts.

"Music is the soul of New Orleans and no one embodies that soul more than Professor Bryan," Fitts said. "From Carnegie Hall to the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival to the halls of academia she has shared her gift with fans, students and collaborators, exploring and expressing the deepest emotions through music and inspiring others to do the same."

Tulane School of Liberal Arts Dean Brian T. Edwards praised Bryan's creative vision and her considerable talents as a performer. "Courtney Bryan is one of the most exciting composers in America today. From her profound meditations on breath and racial violence to the thrilling expressiveness of her triumphal work, the range of her

innovation and the depth of her talent is stunning,” Edwards said. “As a pianist, she has performed in the world-class venues from Snug Harbor on Frenchmen Street to the Blue Note in New York, and her compositions have been performed by the New York Philharmonic, the London Sinfonietta, and the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra, among many others. But with all this, she remains a dedicated teacher and a generous colleague – someone we are so proud to call a Tulanian.”

In addition to recognizing and supporting exceptional creativity, the fellowship is meant to inspire people to pursue their own creative interests. The award comes with an \$800,000 condition-free stipend. Bryan said she doesn’t yet know how she’ll spend her stipend, but it will likely involve giving back to her hometown New Orleans, she said.

“I’m thinking about things I want to do for my community as well as for myself,” Bryan said. “New Orleans is so important to me. It’s home and a unique and special place — the culture, the history and the kind of talent we have here. New Orleans formed who I am and how I see the world, and if there’s something creative I want to do, I want to base it in New Orleans.”

The last Tulane recipient of the MacArthur fellowship was [Jesmyn Ward](#) in 2017. Ward is Professor of English and Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities in the School of Liberal Arts, and one of the nation’s leading authors. She’s a two-time National Book Award winner — in 2011 for her novel *Salvage the Bones* and in 2017 for the novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

Her 2020 book, [Navigate Your Stars](#), is based on her [2018 Tulane University commencement speech](#). Ward’s new novel, *Let Us Descend*, will be published later this month.

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