

[National Spotlight on Clarinetist Michael White](#)

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Anyone attending the Tulane commencement ceremony during the last decade has heard the music of Michael White, a bandleader, instrumentalist and scholar whose band has sent thousands of graduates out into the world to a distinctly New Orleans beat. For his lifelong work as a purveyor and student of traditional New Orleans jazz, White, who is an alumnus of the university, is the recipient of a [2008 National Heritage Fellowship](#) from the National Endowment for the Arts.



Michael White is a familiar performer in New Orleans jazz circles, leading the Original Liberty Jazz Band, but his national recognition is thriving as well. He will give a special concert at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 20. (Photos by Paula Burch-Celentano)

The attention he is receiving as one of a handful of fellows cited by the NEA is dovetailing nicely with another major event in his life ? the release of *Blue Crescent*, a CD of mostly original music that he recorded locally at the Tulane-affiliated [A Studio in the Woods](#) and released in June.

“Critically the CD is doing very well,” says White. “It’s playing on 45 stations around the country and it’s No. 17 on one of the jazz charts.”

For White, who lost his New Orleans home and personal jazz archive in Hurricane Katrina (see the *Tulanian* magazine [story](#)), *Blue Crescent* is his first post-storm recording, and the tunes reflect the palette of emotions he has experienced over the last three years. The music also is a progression in his composition and performance.

“This is a new approach to playing traditional New Orleans jazz,” he says. “It marks the music of New Orleans past and present and blends traditional New Orleans jazz musical principles with those of ethnic folk music.”

White, who was displaced to Houston after Katrina, returned to New Orleans to live on a permanent basis in December 2007, after spending two years bouncing back and forth between cities. Despite the logistical challenges of finding, contacting and coordinating displaced musicians, White resumed his annual gig leading Dr. Michael White’s Original Liberty Jazz Band at Tulane’s first post-storm commencement in 2006. This summer, he and the band are spending much of the time on the road, touring France, Spain and, most recently, Brazil.

In September, White will travel to Washington, D.C., to join other NEA fellows in a series of events, including a banquet at the Library of Congress and an awards presentation on Capitol Hill. He’ll be accompanied by his bandmates, who will perform with him on Sept. 19 at a fellows concert at the Music Center at Strathmore in Bethesda, Md., and a special concert at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 20.

While the bulk of the \$20,000 fellowship award is going toward his post-storm recovery expenses, White said he found at least one pleasant way to spend a portion of the windfall.

“When I was in France an amazing thing happened; I had the chance to visit a clarinet factory and I found a very special clarinet.”

White purchased the instrument and is enjoying the process of getting to know it. “It is something I feel I can grow with,” he says, “something spiritual and powerful.”