

Exploring the Power of Brass Band Music

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Rebirth. Soul Rebels. The Hot 8. These are some of the great modern-day brass bands of New Orleans, popular with locals and recently introduced to wider America through the HBO TV series “Treme.” The power of the music and its cultural icon status is the focus of a book being written by Tulane musicologist Matt Sakakeeny.



A brass band plays at a jazz funeral for Kerwin James, brother of Rebirth founders Philip and Keith Frazier, in the Treme neighborhood on Oct 6, 2007. (Photo by Matt Sakakeeny)

“Brass band music is the quintessential New Orleans music ? feel-good music that gets people involved and gets them moving,” says [Sakakeeny](#), an assistant professor in the Newcomb Department of Music. “The music and dance is all about pleasure, but the pleasure can only really be understood in relation to struggle, the particular struggle of black New Orleanians who have historically been subject to neglect and marginalization.”

Sakakeeny will explore this dichotomy as he completes *Instruments of Power: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans* during the fall semester with a grant from the Awards to Louisiana Artists and Scholars (ATLAS) program of the Louisiana Board of

Regents.

“In the time of Jim Crow segregation, or in the current climate where blacks in the street are associated with criminality, what could be more meaningful than proudly dancing through the city streets, dancing to good-time music?” he asks.

Sakakeeny first became interested in the brass band tradition in 1997, when he moved to New Orleans to work for public radio program [“American Routes”](#) with Nick Spitzer, now a professor of anthropology at Tulane.

“We would record jazz funerals, second-line parades and interviews with musicians from the top bands,” Sakakeeny recalls. “The music draws people in more than anything I had experienced growing up in Worcester, Mass., or studying classical music.”

He focused on brass band music for his doctoral dissertation from Columbia University and he's added to that [research](#) since his return to New Orleans.

A sneak preview of Sakakeeny's musings on the importance of the music can be read in his blog, [“Sound of Treme.”](#)