

## Full of praise for Mahalia

March 10, 2015 10:30 AM Hannah Dean  
newwave@tulane.edu



Vocalist Cynthia Girtley, accompanied by Dr. Michael White, left, and the Original Liberty Jazz Band, sings one of Mahalia Jackson's favorite songs during Saturday's (March 7) concert in Dixon Hall at Tulane University. The concert and an earlier conference honored the late Jackson, a gospel music legend. (Photos by Kathy Anderson)

New Orleanian and gospel music great Mahalia Jackson died in 1972, but her impact on music continues today, according to speakers at a conference and concert, "Mahalia's New Orleans," at Tulane University on Saturday (March 7). Students, professors, community members and gospel music lovers came together to

celebrate the life and legacy of the international gospel star.

"Mahalia's voice was phenomenally influential and is still often imitated in popular music," said panel member [Matt Sakakeeny](#), Tulane associate professor of music, at the conference. He played several samples comparing the singer's style to that of contemporary artists such as Adele and Sam Smith.

Another panel member, the Rev. Dwight Webster of the Christian Unity Baptist Church, gave a brief history of gospel from its origins in slaves' meeting houses to its connection to the civil rights movement. He emphasized gospel's ability to galvanize people to resist through creative and powerful expression, noting that "gospel is a genre, style and a movement."

Jerry Brock of local radio station WWOZ-FM built upon this theme by adding that as a gospel singer who grew up in a city as racially charged as New Orleans, Mahalia Jackson personified the idea of resistance through beauty in the local and national African-American community.

Gospel music is a "dynamic form of group creativity" that emerged from community-based a cappella groups called jubilee quartets, said Joyce Jackson, an anthropologist at Louisiana State University. As these groups added instruments to their music and they were invited to churches to perform. This union between musicians, churches and gospel's communal nature created a foundation where Mahalia Jackson found her passion for singing gospel music, Jackson said.

A concert after the conference featured singer Irma Thomas as well as Dr. Michael White's Original Liberty Jazz Band with vocalist Cynthia Girtley. [Newcomb College Institute's](#) Skou Art and Music Fund and the [Newcomb Music Department](#) sponsored the events.

*Hannah Dean is a sophomore majoring in Latin American studies and political science at Tulane University.*



During the conference, “Mahalia's New Orleans,” members of a panel talk about Mahalia Jackson's contributions to music. They are, from left, Matt Sakakeeny, Tulane associate professor of music; Joyce Jackson, an anthropologist at Louisiana State University; the Rev. Dwight Webster of the Christian Unity Baptist Church; and Jerry Brock, co-founder of WWOZ-FM.

“Mahalia's voice was phenomenally influential and is still often imitated in popular music.”—Matt Sakakeeny, associate professor of music