



# Caretaker of a treasured musical legacy

## Greg Lambousy leads the way at the New Orleans Jazz Museum

*By Dean M. Shapiro*

**W**hen the Louisiana State Museum and the lieutenant governor's office made the decision to upgrade the limited jazz history exhibit wing in the French Quarter's Old U.S. Mint building into a full-fledged jazz museum in 2016, they chose a well-qualified musical authority to spearhead that effort.

PHOTO BY ELIOT KAMENITZ



*Yoshio Toyama, Keiko Toyama, Don Marquis and Greg Lambousy*



*Dr. John*



*Ellis Marsalis*

Greg Lambousy was ready to hit the ground running when he accepted the challenge of becoming the first director of the New Orleans Jazz Museum

Already a key staff member and researcher with the LSM for more than 20

years at that point, Lambousy brought to the table an extensive background in New Orleans history and music, along with an exuberant love for both. Not only is he a historian with an encyclopedic knowledge of the local musical culture, he is also a musician himself. Over the years he has played drums in various bands and he currently performs with Grayhawk Perkins of the United Houma Nation.

Overseeing a staff of 30 people, plus a large number of volunteers and college student interns, while managing an annual budget of roughly \$1.7 million – which includes funding to pay musicians who perform there – would be a challenge for most people but not for Lambousy who looks at what he does as a “dream job.”

“I love it. I love what I do here,” Lambousy said during a recent interview. “It combines my interests in music and history with my love for the city. It’s great to be in the French Quarter in a historic building, making music and sharing the history of New Orleans music with everybody who comes here. We’ve been getting visitors from all over the world,” he added.

“We have a great team here and it’s been a lot of fun. Coming out of COVID and the hurricane, there has been an explosion of possibilities as the world is starting to wake back up again,” he continued.

Over the past few months the Jazz Museum has been staging or sponsoring a regular series of concerts in its second floor performance room, as well as on the

museum’s grounds. New exhibits have been installed in the museum’s galleries, including a tribute to New Orleans-born entertainer Louis Prima and the “Drumville: Evolution of the New Orleans Beat” exhibit which highlights many of the great drummers the city has produced over the past century and a half.



*Johnny Vidacovich*

Internationally renowned artist James Michalopoulos’ original paintings of some of New Orleans’ most famous musicians and vocalists grace the walls of one of the second floor galleries. The exhibit will continue through the next JazzFest.

The museum also offers educational programs for schoolchildren in the recently opened Education Center, funded largely by renowned trumpeter and music producer Herb Alpert, and the Ruth U. Fertel Jazz Lab, made possible by a donation from her son, Randy Fertel. There are also lectures and other presentations for adults, archival resources for researchers and even a recording studio for the museum’s Gallatin Street record label. Digital technology is in place for livestream events and concerts.

“We’re doing everything we can to let people know about all the great events we have going on here while doing our part to preserve and pay tribute to this indigenous musical art form we call jazz that was born right here in New Orleans,” Lambousy proudly stated.

Born in Lafayette, Lambousy was raised in Terrytown on the West Bank of Jefferson Parish from an early age and he attended the prestigious Arden Cahill Academy there. “I have a lot of pleasant memories of Cahill in the ‘70s,” he said. “It was experimental, stressing theatre and art.”

From there it was on to several New Orleans area high schools, before graduating from De La Salle and enrolling at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond. Transferring to the University



*Amy St. Amant, Little Freddie King, Greg Lambousy and Jane Irvin*

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GREG LAMBOUSY

of New Orleans he pursued a double major in anthropology and history, and later earned his Master's Degree in history from UNO.

Lambousy's keen knowledge of New Orleans history landed him a position with the Louisiana State Museum system in 1995. Starting at the Presbytere on Jackson Square, he moved around within various other French Quarter units of the LSM, including the Old U.S. Mint and the historic Madame John's Legacy house.

For a short time he was the director of curatorial services for the World War II Museum. "Then the lieutenant governor's staff asked me to come back to run and develop the Jazz Museum," he said, praising and thanking Lt. Governor Billy Nungesser for entrusting him with the director's position.

Prior to Lambousy's arrival as director, the jazz collection at the Old Mint unit of the State Museum's holdings was largely a randomly placed assortment of jazz artifacts and other relics, including a trumpet once owned by Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong. The exhibit's collection occupied a single second floor wing that was underpublicized and sparsely patronized. Most visitors to the city and even many local residents didn't even know about the displays, even though many of those displays had been there for more than 20 years.



PHOTO BY HENRY YORK

Following Hurricane Katrina, which caused some damage to the building, discussions got underway regarding what to do with the collection of artifacts the State Museum had in its possession at the Old Mint.

"It was our goal at the time to have a really engaging music exhibit in some form or other," Lambousy recounted. "It took a while since there were other priorities with the Louisiana State Museum System. But, by 2016, it was decided to turn the entire building into a jazz museum. That's when they asked me to come back and run it."

Today, with an expanded, more specialized staff and a dedicated cadre of volunteers, the New Orleans Jazz Museum is thriving. In addition to the annual Satchmo SummerFest, which has been held on the Old Mint's grounds

every year since its founding in 2001, the Jazz Museum has hosted or sponsored a multitude of festivals, special events and concerts on its grounds as well as inside the historic, nearly 200-year-old structure adjacent to the French Market. Their recently held Improvisations Gala fundraising event drew hundreds of patrons and featured some of New Orleans' premiere musicians performing simultaneously on five separate stages.

In 2019 alone between 18 and 20 festivals were held fully or partially on the grounds of or adjacent to the Old Mint building, Lambousy noted.

Given all the attention the New Orleans Jazz Museum has been attracting lately, no one could be happier than its director. "It's been so good making the collection accessible for the public," Lambousy said. "There's so much potential with education and the exhibits and performances. Other cities have taken jazz to different levels over the years but New Orleans is where it all began. We know that and we want to world to know that. And so far I'm confident that we're doing a good job of it."

*The New Orleans Jazz Museum is located at 400 Esplanade Avenue, adjacent to the French Market. Hours are currently 9 a.m.-4 p.m., subject to change (closed Mondays and major holidays). For more information call 504-568-6993 or visit their website, [www.nolajazzmuseum.org](http://www.nolajazzmuseum.org).*



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