

His Heart is in the Treme.

Cyril B. Saulny spearheads efforts to showcase New Orleans' historic neighborhood

By Dean M. Shapiro, Senior Editor

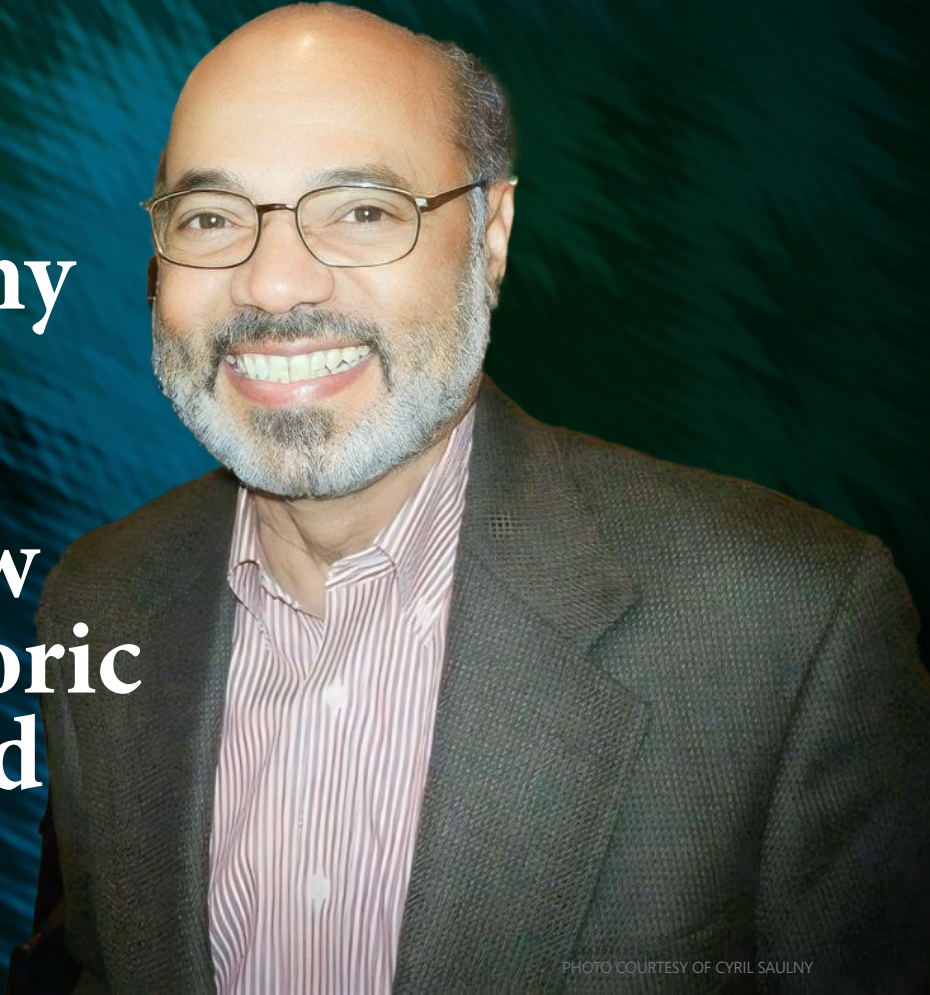


PHOTO COURTESY OF CYRIL SAULNY

Born, raised, reared and still residing in New Orleans in the Treme neighborhood, where his family roots date back to the 1800s, Cyril B. Saulny was quick to observe how the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 radically impacted what is reputed to be the oldest settlement of Free People of Color in the United States.

What was once a thriving, 7-square-mile neighborhood of nearly 9,000 people in 2000, had shrunk by more than half that number according to the 2010 census. Many of the Treme residents displaced by the hurricane were families with deep roots in the community.

As a longtime community organizer and civic leader, Cyril collaborated with half a dozen other influential Treme residents, founding a new community organization they called Treme For Treme (Treme4Treme, T4T) of which he serves as president.

“We incorporated in 2012 as a nonprofit organization,” Cyril explained. “We are an umbrella organization for Treme residents and businesses working for the good of the Treme community. Everybody who were founders of T4T and who served on our board of directors has a long history of working in the social services.”

“There was a need for an organization like ours,” Cyril continued. “Somebody had to step up and try to determine what we wanted Treme to look like five years from that date.”

As a key component of their mission to highlight the importance of Treme – especially the vital role it played in the birth and development of New Orleans’ world-renowned musical art forms – Cyril and the other Treme4Treme board members and supporters identified Armstrong Park as one of the community’s greatest assets, and have focused their efforts on enhancing Louis Armstrong Park which is the gateway into the historic neighborhood. They have partnered with the Levitt Foundation and are working on plans to acquire a portion of the park in which to develop the proposed Levitt Pavilion New Orleans at Armstrong Park. The Levitt Pavilion is an open-air pavilion and entertainment venue for staging fifty (50) free musical concerts and events from which Treme’s contributions to the city’s musical heritage can be showcased, along with other genres of music.



Made possible by donations from the Connecticut-based Levitt Foundation, Levitt Pavilions and other community-related music projects sponsored by the foundation are widely scattered among most of the 50 U.S. states.

Cyril was also recently in the forefront of what is slated to become a yearly Historical and Cultural Black Music Series celebrating the Juneteenth holiday. The series will pay tribute to generations of Black music, ranging from the Creole classical composers of the 1800s to the early forms of jazz and up to the present.

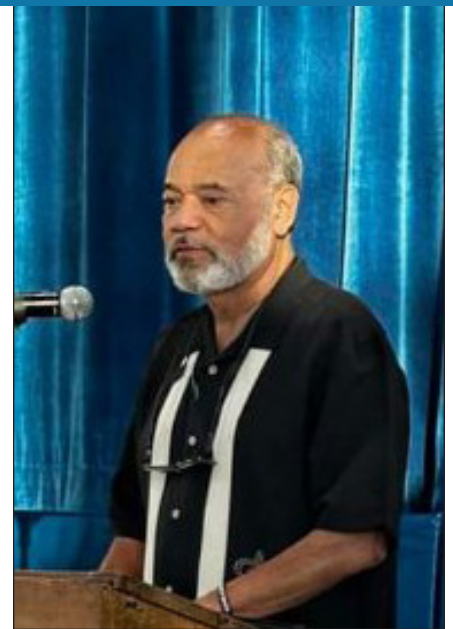
The inaugural event Music of A Movement: A Symphonic Anthology (1950s - 1970s) that was staged on June 19, 2024 featured the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra with guest conductor Jonathan Taylor Rush, local vocalists and Deepa Soul and the Love Soul Orchestra. It attracted a near-capacity crowd to the Mahalia Jackson Theater for the Performing Arts in Armstrong Park and was well-received by those in attendance.

In a recent interview, Cyril recalled many of the fond memories he has of growing up in the Treme neighborhood and he emphasized why it is a special place for him.

“We grew up with a village of people inclusive of other ethnic groups,” he said. “It was primarily Black but it was mixed. We had Irish people, Italians and others. We played football in the street together. As kids, we didn’t know anything about race. It was just a fun time.”

Cyril spoke fondly about his late mother who neighbors called Miss Polly. “Everybody loved my mother. She used to feed everyone,” he recalled with a laugh. His mother passed away in 1977 at the age of 46, one week after his high school graduation.

His father, Calvin J. Saulny Sr., was another well-loved figure in the neighborhood. An employee of the Maison Blanche store on Canal Street for 36 years, he also coached the CYO basketball team for St. Peter Claver Catholic Church School which he had attended and starred on their



championship basketball team. He passed in 2019 at the age of 93.

In addition to Cyril, the family also included his older brother and sister, Calvin Jr. (now deceased) and Pamela.

Cyril attended nearby Joseph A. Craig Elementary School and he went on to Andrew J. Bell Junior High School. “I was a very good student and was involved in student leadership at Bell,” he said. “I played just about every sport there, football, baseball, basketball, and I ran track.” He also ran track when he attended McDonogh 35 High School.

After attending Joseph A. Craig Elementary, the family moved from Marais Street to St. Philip Street on the lake side of I-10. For Cyril, it was a major turning point in his life. Nearby was the home of Louis Charbonnet III, the funeral home family scion, who was running for a seat in the Louisiana State Legislature.

“I hung around the funeral home and worked on Louis’ campaigns and that’s what sparked me to get involved in student government. He was basically the person who mentored me about politics,” Cyril said.

Cyril went on to become the senior class president at McDonogh 35 and, following graduation, he became freshman and sophomore class presidents at Xavier University where he graduated with a B.A. in Political Science. In later years he ran for a seat in

the state legislature and for the New Orleans City Council and he worked on dozens of campaigns for other candidates.

Immediately after college, he worked for the New Orleans Recreation Department, supervising the adult programs of the department. Then he moved on to positions with the Regional Transit Authority and the Black Collegian Magazine.

These experiences in both the public and private sectors, plus his earlier volunteer work as the president of the NAACP Youth Council, prepared Cyril for one of the crowning achievements of his life and career, the presidency of the New Orleans Branch of the NAACP from 1997 to 2002.

“During my tenure as the local NAACP president, I was instrumental in developing the award-winning local NAACP ACT-SO program in which community volunteers mentor students toward competing nationally and pursuing careers in the visual and performing arts and other businesses,” he stated. The acronym stands for the Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics.

As branch president, Cyril met such Civil Rights icons as Julian Bond, Roy Wilkins, Benjamin Hooks, Rosa Parks, Myrlie Evers-Williams, all of whom gave him inspiration and encouragement for the work he was doing in New Orleans.

In 2012, when T4T was founded, much of Treme was still in the process of rebuilding and recovering from the damage caused by the storm. The nonprofit drew up a mission statement, outlining four basic objectives which Cyril read off.

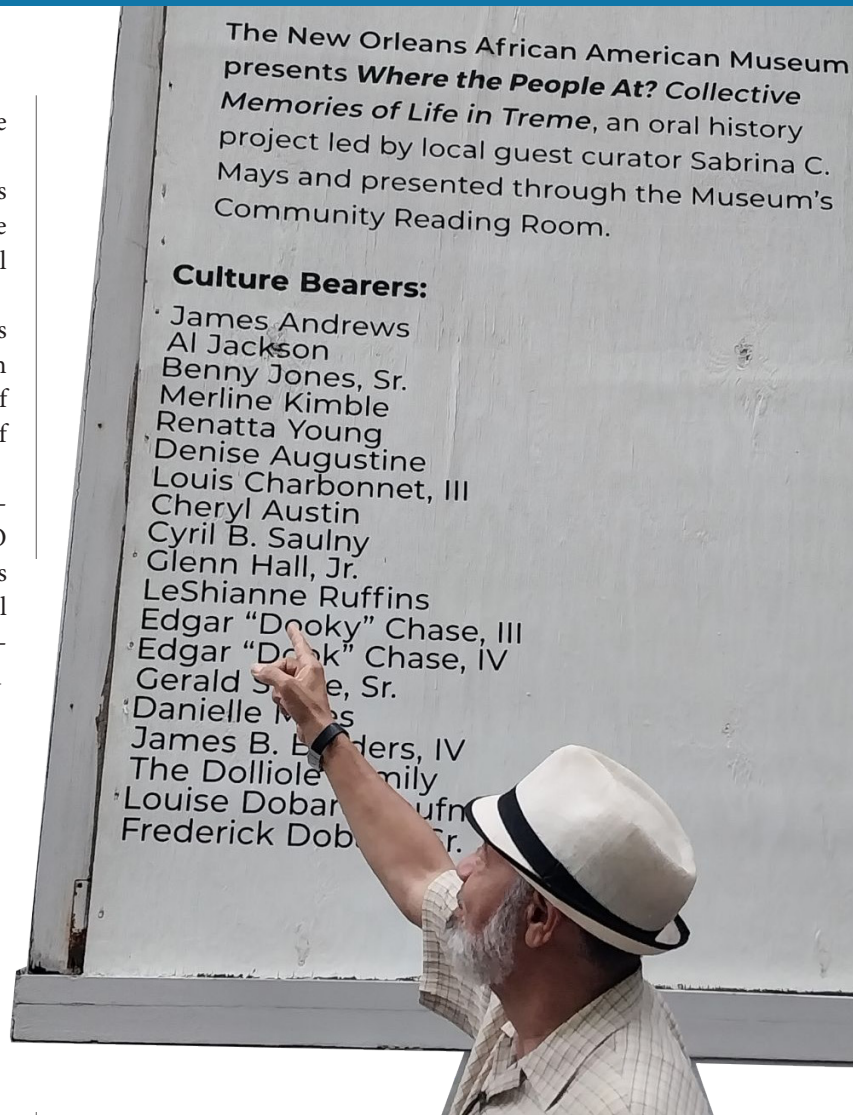
“Our goals were to maintain the indigenous population, keep the music and street culture of Treme alive, foster community and sustainable economic development, and do those things in the great spirit of joy and celebration which is native to New Orleans and began in Treme.”

In addition, he spoke about the group’s objective of making the entirety of Louis Armstrong Park more visible and viable. “We identified the park as one of the largest assets of the Treme,” Cyril noted. “It was underutilized. It was a passive park and it had no restrooms and no programming other than a few festivals here and there. But there was nothing on a consistent basis.”

He went on to elaborate on the group’s efforts to create a Public/



(l. to r.) Cyril with Kweisi Mfume, President & CEO National NAACP, and Daniel F. Packer, President & CEO, Entergy New Orleans PHOTO COURTESY OF CYRIL B. SAULNY



Private Partnership with the City of New Orleans, develop a Levitt Pavilion in the park and raise the approximately \$10 million he estimated would be needed to bring the project to fruition. He is

optimistic for raising the money through city and state funding, plus whatever else might be contributed from individuals, private sector and philanthropic organizations and groups.

And so, as always the innovator and driving force, Cyril B. Saulny continues to do whatever is within his means to help improve and promote the culturally historic neighborhood that has always been his beloved home.

“It is widely recognized that it was the deep resilience of New Orleans, rising from the love of its people for the place and its culture, that produced a bottom-up process of renewal,” he said. “The people and institutions of the Treme neighborhood are ready to take their place and accept their responsibility for planning their own future, creating that future and continuing that renewal.”

For more information about Treme4Treme, visit their website at www.treme4tremenola.org Email treme4tremenola@gmail.com or call (504)415-5250.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CYRIL SAULNY