

LAWRENCE COTTON: Still Tickling the Ivories at 94!

By Pat Jolly



PHOTO COURTESY OF KERRY BROWN

Prior to the pervasive pandemic, 94-year-old Lawrence Cotton was playing piano regularly as the oldest performing musician in New Orleans. As the infection rate gradually recedes, Cotton is looking forward to the return of his weekly gig at Preservation Hall, as well as finding gigs for his own Legendary Experience band and performing with Jane Harvey Brown's Trad Jazz Stars. Until then he is playing porch concerts at his home with his next door neighbors, vocalist Jane Harvey Brown, drummer Kerry Brown and the multiple friends who show up to play.

Cotton also finds great fulfillment in being a lifetime member of the Second Baptist Sixth District Baptist Church

where he serves as a deacon and trustee. "My greatest joy is sharing my faith with cherished friends and having such strong common bonds," he said. "The congregant churchgoers have a special relationship beyond friendship. In living a good life in our dedication to God we share a bond of mutual affection. The church is my home away from home with my extended family of Christian friends."

As he speaks about his eventful life and career, Cotton displays a beautiful infectious smile that goes well with his friendly, cheerful personality. "We're excited and delighted" is one of his frequently heard comments, which perfectly describes the way he has lived.

Lawrence Cotton was born in Uptown New Orleans on February 2, 1927, and he still lives close to the Mississippi River, where he has lived all of his life when not touring. Inspired by his pianist father, Cotton was self-taught with no formal training until after he had served in the Army Air Corps (now the U.S. Air Force) for three years, during which he was promoted to "Sergeant Cotton." Like many black servicemen returning to New Orleans with an interest in music, he took advantage of the G.I. Bill to enroll in the local Grunewald School of Music.

In addition to receiving a first-rate musical education, the group of students who were just returning home to New



PHOTO COURTESY OF KERRY BROWN

Cotton and Kerry Brown have been friends for decades since they played in bands together in the heyday of Bourbon Street's jazz days, so Kerry and his lovely wife, Jane, kindly see to his every need. Cotton explained that he adopted Kerry 23 years ago "So we are actu-

ally a family," he proudly noted.

You can feel the comfort, love and kinship between them in everyday activities that are filled with smiles and laughter. Kerry said, "Cotton is a great joy in my life." When describing having Cotton as part of their lives, Jane says it's a "win win." Those who know the legendary pianist are also aware that just being in his presence is a "win win."

In addition to being an accomplished drummer, Kerry Brown has been the Festival Producer/Director of the Gretna Heritage Festival for 25 years. He has also been involved with talent acquisitions for many festivals throughout the years, so

Davenport (with whom he also toured Europe), and Teddy Riley, before forming his own band, Lawrence Cotton's Legendary Experience.

"There's been music all around me here ever since I can remember," Cotton was quoted as saying in a recent magazine article. "In some cities you go to there's no music. I don't see how people can live

there."

Orleans were excited to be forming new friendships and sharing a common love for music, plus that important sense of community that New Orleans offers. Many of them would bond into bands and perform together for years afterward.

Cotton's first professional job was at a local club with bassist Lloyd Lambert's rhythm and blues band. The opportunity came just at the time when Lambert needed to replace his piano player. Then they hit the road, performing with such R&B greats as T-Bone Walker, Big Joe Turner and Guitar Slim, who became an in-demand R&B sensation. Cotton toured and recorded with Slim from 1954-1958.

Back in New Orleans, Cotton played with local groups Edgar Blanchard and the Gondoliers, then Danny White and the Cavaliers. For more than a decade he worked with legendary performer-producer Dave Bartholomew's orchestra. Cotton later played traditional jazz on Bourbon Street with bandleaders Wallace



Kanako Fuwa Brooks, Detroit Brooks and Lawrence Cotton at the Palm Court Jazz Cafe Christmas Party
PHOTO © PAT JOLLY 2019



*Lawrence Cotton, Joe Cushenberry and Kerry Brown
Brown drives both Cotton and blind Joe Cushinberry to their gigs and fun events*
PHOTO BY: PAT JOLLY

he knows how to create opportunities for musicians. Besides getting work for Cotton, more importantly, Brown drives both Cotton and blind Joe Cushenberry to every gig they have, as well as to events for fun. He wants to be sure that they keep working and enjoying life, which of course has a great impact on life expectancy.

Also, Kerry and Jane produce the locally famous "Cotton Fest" every year during Carnival Season to celebrate Cotton's birthdays. Widely renowned musicians like Deacon John, Leo Nocentelli and many others join in to pay homage to esteemed and beloved Lawrence Cotton every year. This year his barber, Bo Dollis Jr. plus the Wild Magnolias Mardi Gras Indians (currently referred to as Black Masking Indians), beguiled friends and onlookers with their chanting, strutting



PHOTO BY: PAT JOLLY

motions and stunning beauty while the Storyville Stompers Brass Band played. Trombonist Craig Klein called it "Stompers on Steroids" because so many musicians showed up to pay tribute to Cotton.

In 2019, the Preservation Hall Foundation named him a Master Practitioner. As they said, "We can't wait to see him tickle the ivories again at 726 St. Peter."

Photos and videos of Lawrence Cotton are accessible on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/Lawrence-Cotton-New-Orleans-Piano-Legend-278303789040610/>. You can also view a 90-minute video of the 2021 Cotton Fest at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GR9EOJajCw0>