



# INTERVIEW – Sweet Georgia Brown: from streets to Montreux star

By Jason Rhodes

MONTREUX, Switzerland (Reuters Life!) - Blues singer Sweet Georgia Brown made her dream come true with an electrifying performance at the Montreux Jazz Festival six years after she was found sleeping rough on the streets of New York.

Brown, making her major international debut aged 62, won the night's first standing ovation that most expected would be granted to bluesman and headliner BB King.

"I never thought in a million years I would be singing with BB King. This is a dream come true for me," said Brown before joining a host of stars in a late-night jam session at the end of King's crowd-pleasing performance.

Her break came when the Jazz Foundation of America showcased her in New York to producer Quincy Jones and Montreux Jazz festival organiser Claude Nobs.



"Man, we kicked so much ass that night and Claude played the harmonica with me. It was unbelievable," Brown said in an interview after her set.

When the musicians' charity first heard of Brown, she was sleeping in New York's Penn Station after a fire had robbed her and her disabled granddaughter of their home.

"Georgia Brown has quite a story," said Wendy Oxenhorn, executive director of the Jazz Foundation of America, which helps musicians in distress. "She had a very challenging life. She's always struggled as all blues musicians do."

"She's well known in New York -- she's one of the last of the real Harlem diva blues queens," Oxenhorn said of Brown, who has been singing and dancing since the age of three.

After winning amateur night at the Apollo aged 15, Brown gained little recognition outside the New York clubs where she has performed for most of a career spanning nearly six decades.

"You know music is a hard business. It's not very fair," said Brown's guitarist Stew Cutler.

"You see people who are absolutely incredible and nothing ever happens for them, nobody ever hears of them, they have no work."

The audience on Sunday in Montreux's Stravinski Auditorium on the shore of Lake Geneva can vouch for Brown's talent after a stunning performance that combined electric blues power with the showwomanship of old-style blues divas.

"I feel like I'm a new breed in blues," said Brown, who draws inspiration from early female blues performers such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. "I want to move it with more up-to-date stuff but keep it to blues."

"Remember, I'm 62 years old and I started at three and god knows I prayed that something like this could happen," she said. "I finally got the band I love after all these years. I mean everything is working in place."

"If you love music and you really believe that this is your calling, then do it," said Brown. "I had to quit jobs. Nine to five I've never kept a job, I always got fired, but do you know what? This is all worth it."

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## A Long Road Back, but Not a Lonely One

By VINCENT M. MALLOZZI

With his wife's help, Terence Conley walked slowly toward a piano on a recent Thursday at the Jazz Foundation of America headquarters in Manhattan.

"Play something nice," Judith Conley told her husband as she eased him onto a piano stool.

Mr. Conley, 51, steadied his fingers above the keys, smiled across the room in the direction of his three children and began playing "Ruby, My Dear."

"I'm glad he chose that tune," his wife whispered. "It's one of the hardest to play in all of jazz."

For Mr. Conley, a former member of the Count Basie Orchestra, tackling those difficult chords was another small but important step in his recovery from a September accident that nearly killed him.



Several months before, he had taken a job as a driver for Federal Express to earn some extra money — decent-paying jazz gigs had been disappearing even before the recession.

"Things were drying up," Mr. Conley said softly. "I needed to feed my family."

On Sept. 29, the day before he was to interview for a job teaching piano at Lincoln Center, Mr. Conley was driving his FedEx truck in Midtown Manhattan when he crashed into the back of a bus that he says had stopped abruptly. He sustained major head injuries and was deliberately put into a coma for more than a month by doctors at Bellevue Hospital Center in Manhattan who were trying to reduce swelling and stop the bleeding on his brain.

"We didn't know if or when he was going to wake up," Mrs. Conley said. "Either way, doctors were saying that he would eventually be sent to a nursing home."

Then one day at Bellevue, in mid-October, Mrs. Conley leaned over to kiss her husband.

"I'm so sad that this happened to you," she told him.

Though her husband could not speak, his answer came in the form of a teardrop that rolled down his cheek.

"He pointed to that teardrop as if to say 'I'm sorry, too,'" Mrs. Conley recalled through tears of her own. "I knew right then that he understood everything I was saying, and that he would hear my own. 'I knew right then that he understood everything I was saying, and that he would continue to fight

to get better."

Mrs. Conley, who met her husband at the Berklee College of Music in Boston (where they became friends with a rising saxophonist named Branford Marsalis), insisted her husband be sent to Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan, and not a nursing home, so he could receive therapy.

Her request was granted, and in the ensuing months, Mr. Conley began making remarkable strides.

"He came in here at just about point zero," Dr. Brian D. Greenwald, a physiatrist at Mount Sinai who specializes in brain injury rehabilitation, said of Mr. Conley. "It's incredible to see how much progress he has made."

Mr. Conley left the hospital on Jan. 13 and went home to the small apartment in Prospect-Lefferts Gardens, Brooklyn, that he shares with his wife and children: Brandon, 16, Joralyssa, 11, and Christopher, 7. A few weeks later, he began feeling well enough to sit and play at his own piano.

"Other than my wife and children, I missed my piano the most," Mr. Conley said. "I look forward to the day when I can get back on stage again."

The Jazz Foundation of America, which has helped the Conleys pay roughly \$9,000 in rent and other bills through a fund provided by the philanthropist Agnes Varis, staged a welcome-back party for him on April 19 at St. Peter's Church in Midtown. The event brought together many of the musicians that Mr. Conley had performed with at the Blue Note and Birdland and other jazz clubs in New York in the past 20 years, including the pianist Barry Harris and Mr. Marsalis.

"Terence was always a beautiful guy and a talented musician," Mr. Marsalis said. "When you go to a conservatory, you're surrounded more by competitors than friends, but Terence and Judith were among the few real friends that I had back then."

On that recent Thursday, the Conley family had gone to the Jazz Foundation headquarters to meet Wendy Oxenhorn, the group's executive director. She has offered Mr. Conley the opportunity to begin performing again at nursing homes around the city as a dignified way of helping him pay his bills.

After their meeting, Mr. Conley went downstairs to the foundation's tiny performance hall, where he found musicians preparing for the organization's next fund-raiser: "A Great Night in Harlem," at the Apollo Theater. The piano was unoccupied, and Mr. Conley seized the moment. When he was done playing his last tune — "It Could Happen to You" — he walked off the stage and was greeted by another legendary saxophonist, Max Lucas, 99, who has performed with the likes of Louis Armstrong, Etta James, Muddy Waters, Dinah Washington and Thelonious Monk.

"He's a fine young piano player," Mr. Lucas said shortly after hugging Mr. Conley. "The jazz world needs him back."

## KEEPING JAZZ MUSICIANS ALIVE

Many world-renowned jazz & blues musicians have no pensions, no medical plans, no hope

by Nat Hentoff

*I cannot even imagine the world without jazz and the blues, and I cannot imagine turning our backs on the very people who gave their lives, their life experiences, and the music to us all these years, especially now when they need us most, that's what the Jazz Foundation does.*

— Quincy Jones

In 1918, the New Orleans Times-Picayune declared jazz "an atrocity in polite society," and fulminated that "we should make it a point of civic honor to suppress it. Its musical value is nil, and its possibilities of harm are great." But jazz went on to become an international language, surviving even in dictatorships that banned it. Nazi Germany condemned the music as a disgusting "Negro-Jewish" mongrelization. And in the years jazz was still prohibited in the U.S.S.R., a Moscow tenor saxophonist wrote me that he had translated my John Coltrane liner notes and covertly distributed them to other musicians in unlawful samizdats.

But as the years went on, and more sidemen and leaders grew ill or fell out of fashion, few of the music's admirers here or around the world were aware of the barren last years of these musicians. Jazz musicians do not have pensions, and very few have medical plans or other resources. Pianist Wynton Kelly, for example—a vital sideman for Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie—died penniless. I was at the first recording session of pianist Phineas Newborn, whose mastery of the instrument was astonishing. As jazz musicians say, he told a story. His ended in a pauper's grave in Memphis.

At last, 17 years ago, in New York, a group of musicians and jazz enthusiasts for whom the music had become essential to their lives formed the Jazz Foundation of America. Its mission is to regenerate the lives of abandoned players—paying the rents before they're evicted, taking care of their medical needs, and providing emergency living expenses.

Because of Dizzy Gillespie—who had such a strong will to live and more generosity of spirit than anyone I've ever known—the Jazz Foundation has been able to send musicians to New Jersey's Englewood Hospital and Medical Center and its Dizzy Gillespie Memorial Fund. In 1993, Dizzy, dying of cancer at Englewood Hospital, said to his oncologist and hematologist, Dr. Frank Forte, a jazz guitarist by night, "Can you find a way to get the medical care I'm getting for musicians who can't afford it?" Since then, at no cost, jazz makers have received a wide range of treatment there—from cancer care to hip replacements.

A very active Jazz Foundation board—including musicians and extraordinarily generous donors—has continuously expanded the foundation's reach to musicians in this area and elsewhere. (I'm an inactive member of the board. All I do is write about what it does.) The indispensable driving force at the Jazz Foundation is its executive director, Wendy Oxenhorn. I've known a number of people who gave their all to keep others alive—death penalty lawyers and human rights workers, for example—but I've never come across anyone who is so continually on call as Wendy, at all hours, even when she herself is not well. Says Wendy: "The average guy who calls in has not been to a doctor for 20 years. One hadn't been for 50 years." And she tells musicians and everyone else that "these are in no way handouts. It's a privilege to be of use to people who spent a lifetime giving us all they had."

In January, the world's largest organization of what I call the family of jazz—the musicians, broadcasters, critics, producers,

historians, et al, of the International Association for Jazz Education—will hold its 34th Annual International Conference in New York. On January 10, the IAJE, for the first time in its history, will present a special award recognizing the incalculable efforts of the Jazz Foundation in support of the New Orleans and Gulf Coast musician communities after the Hurricane Katrina disaster.

Among those receiving the award is the Jazz Foundation's president, Jarrett Lilien, head of E\*Trade Financial, for providing the funds to house hundreds of musicians and their families. He has done much more for the foundation, and is working on creating the Players' Residence for jazz musicians in New York—with low rents, a place for jamming, dental and medical facilities, recording studios, and a phone contact for gigs. It'll be the first of its kind in the world. More of that and other Jazz Foundation projects in a future column.

Also getting the award is Agnes Varis of Agvar Chemicals Inc., who, along with her many other wide-ranging donations to the foundation, made it possible for Wendy and the staff to provide jobs for hundreds of musicians displaced by Katrina in eight states. The third recipient will be Wendy Oxenhorn. I hope the gala dinner will include a musical performance by Wendy. As she has demonstrated at the Jazz Foundation's annual benefit concerts at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, Wendy plays a penetratingly passionate blues harmonica.



Wendy Oxenhorn, the rhythm section for the Jazz Foundation of America

Soon after Katrina struck, Wendy—speeding to Lafayette, two and a half hours from devastated New Orleans—had already gotten new instruments for stranded musicians and helped persuade local clubs in the area to provide extra gigs for the players. She also got money for them to work in local schools and shelters. No request for help is beyond her determination. "We had one musician stuck in a shelter with his five-month-old baby," she recalls. "The Red Cross had run out of baby formula, and our social worker, Alisa, managed to get Similac (a maker of baby formula) to donate a case overnight." If you want to be part of this essential branch of the jazz family, you can donate to the Jazz Foundation of America, 322 West 48th Street, 6th floor, New York, NY 10036; 212-245-3999, ext. 21; or [wendy@jazzfoundation.org](mailto:wendy@jazzfoundation.org). The life from this music encircles the globe.



## In Katrina's Wake, Wendy Comes to the Jazzmen's Rescue

by Nat Hentoff

When Hurricane Katrina forced the New Orleans Musicians Clinic to temporarily relocate to Lafayette (2½ hours away), Bethany Bultman, its co-founder, told me from there: "New Orleans is the cradle of American music and we're not going to an early grave!"

The night before (Sept. 7), she continued, "150 New Orleans musicians came together at Grant Street, one of Lafayette's music clubs. They had no instruments. It was as if they were naked. But word began to get out that Wendy Oxenhorn of the Jazz Foundation of America in New York had gotten them new instruments, and a roster of local clubs were adding extra gigs so these musicians could perform again." By the end of the evening, the men were standing taller and smiling.

Soon Ms. Oxenhorn had come to Lafayette. The Jazz Foundation, of which she is executive director, has been keeping hundreds of musicians from homelessness and enabling them to get free medical care for 16 years – not only in New York but elsewhere in the country. Before Katrina, the foundation was helping 35 musicians a week, but now there are many more.

By Sept. 16, Ms. Oxenhorn emailed me from Lafayette, "We made funding possible for 150 gigs for displaced musicians to play in the local shelters and the schools." (The new instruments she had obtained had been donated from the Music and Arts Center in Frederick, Md.)

Moreover, Jarrett Lilien, president of E\*Trade Financial Group, already a major donor to the Jazz Foundation, has announced that E\*Trade will be giving \$100,000 to the foundation to give New Orleans musicians, wherever they are in the diaspora, a chance to get a place of their own with cooking facilities by providing the first month's rent. He urges "100 more to step up in a similar manner in order to make a real difference."

With offers of help for the musicians arriving from around this nation and the world, the Jazz Foundation has set up a comprehensive directory of resources for musicians in need of assistance, and for those who want to help these musicians. At the foundation's Web site ([www.jazzfoundation.org](http://www.jazzfoundation.org)), click on the "Help Musicians Now" link.

Further exemplifying that spirit is Earl J. ("The African Cowboy") Turbinton Jr., 63, who played saxophone with B.B. King but stopped playing after two strokes and bypass surgery. Wendy had often called him on the phone at the New Orleans Musicians Clinic before Hurricane Katrina; and when she told him she was coming to Lafayette and asked him what he needed her to bring him from New York, he said: "I'd like some seeds. I just want to plant some seeds."

He added: "I want to plant something in the ground in New Orleans so we'll see something growing here."

From Lafayette, Wendy sent me a report and a photo of her meeting with Mr. Turbinton for the first time after years of speaking to him only by phone. "He and his portable oxygen tank danced over to me and we started to swing dance while he was hooked-up to the tank. We must have been jumpin' for a full five minutes."

Wendy had previously helped Mr. Turbinton become part of a program for free medication, and had also sent him a harmonica to get the rhythms moving in his lungs. Wendy herself, as she has demonstrated during Jazz Foundation benefit concerts at the storied Apollo Theater, plays powerful down home blues harmonica.

Another dispatch from Wendy told of a "Eddio Bo, a great musician (piano/keyboards), about 70 years old, coming down the street in Lafayette. When I yelled to him that we had found a Wurlitzer Keyboard with removable legs, 5 octave range, and an amp, he started to run toward me down the street like a ten-year-old kid. I got a hug like I'd just come home from a war."

I also have a photo of Wendy with, she writes in the caption, "James Andrews, one of New Orleans most celebrated trumpeters, whom we were able to give a very special new horn thanks to Music and Arts Center (which gave us \$70,000 worth of instruments and never once asked for any credit for their beautiful deed). James lost his house and his horns. But his children are okay. The Jazz Foundation was able to set him up in a new home thanks to the folks at E\*Trade Financial Housing Emergency Fund."

A world-renowned latter-day son of New Orleans, Wynton Marsalis, has been active raising funds for the city's musicians. He told me he's trying to get the word out to those New Orleans musicians who own any property to not be quick to sell it, because developers are rushing in to grab as much land as they can get and will take advantage of these owners.

As for the poor residents without property, Mr. Marsalis told the Sept. 8 New York Times, "For some of them, playing in the clubs was the only means of earning any money. If those musicians come back and don't have an affordable home, that's a big blow."

This is also of concern to Wendy. "With all the money that will be set aside to rebuild New Orleans," she said to me, "let's not forget the most important requirement of all: a complex of low-income housing for the musicians. We all know what happens when developers move in, the way they have taken over parts of Harlem. Before you know it, a new New Orleans could have no affordable place for musicians to live. Already they are having a tough time staying in Louisiana because housing is not readily available and surrounding areas are very expensive. And with not enough clubs to play in, they can't support themselves."

Pertinently, she adds: "Let's not forget one of the biggest tourist attractions of all – the street musicians who made their living on corners passing hats while tourists stood or sat on the sidewalk listening for hours as the streets were filled with some of the most memorable blues and jazz ever played. What a sad day that would be to find New Orleans was rebuilt – yet the streets were silent."

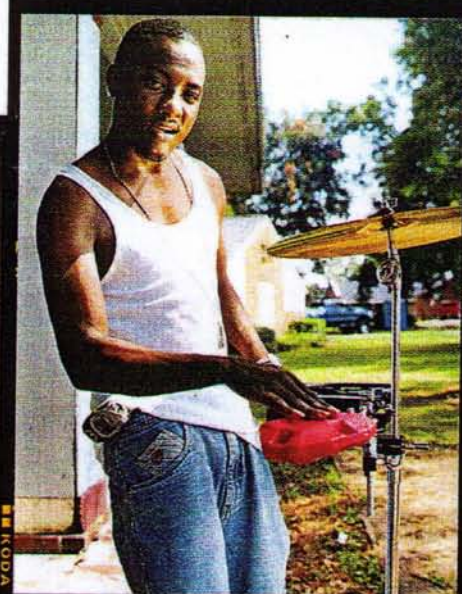
Many years ago, for a book Nat Shapiro and I were editing, "Hear Me Talkin' to Ya: The Story of Jazz as Told by the Men Who Made It," guitarist-singer Danny Barker, long a musical mentor to New Orleans youngsters, including Wynton Marsalis, told us:

"One of my pleasantest memories as a kid growing up in New Orleans was how a bunch of us kids, playing, would suddenly hear sounds. It was like a phenomenon, like the Aurora Borealis, maybe. The sounds of men playing would be so clear, but we wouldn't be sure where they were coming from. So we'd start trotting, start running – 'It's this way!' 'It's that way!' And sometimes, after running for a while, you'd find you'd be nowhere near that music. But that music could come on you any time like that. The city was full of the sounds of music."

And I've never forgotten walking down certain New Orleans streets -- with music coming at me from all sides. I'd go into club after club. I figured that if there's a heaven, I was already there.

*Mr. Hentoff writes about jazz for the Journal.*





**NEW ORLEANS JAZZ** (clockwise from upper left) Earl J. "the African Cowboy" Turbinton Jr., Dinerral "Dic" Shavers Sr., Jimmy "Bean" Ballero, Louis "Red" Morgan (with Jazz Foundation of America executive director Wendy Oxenhorn), James "12" Andrews and Terrell "MacB" Batiste.

# Getting Their Groove Back

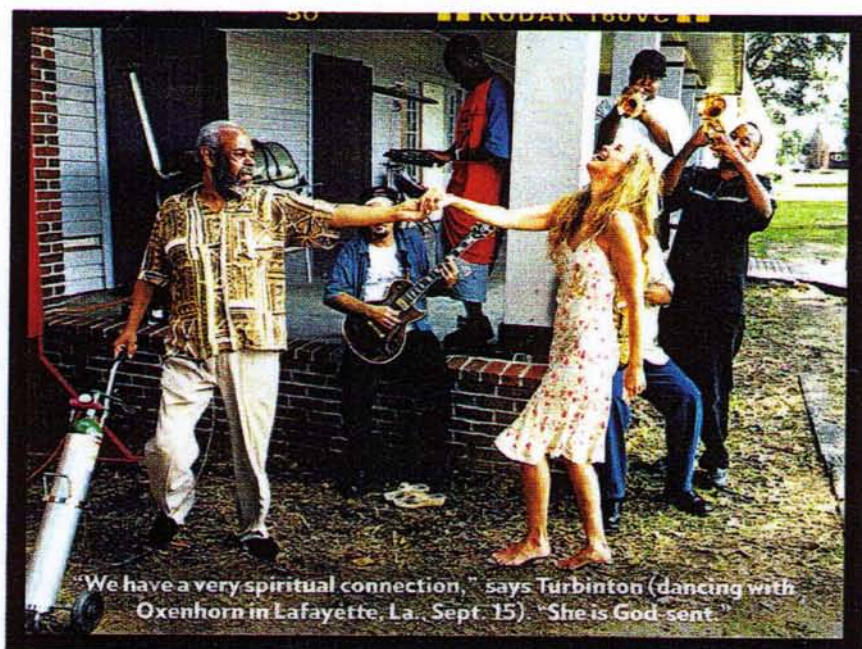
When Katrina washed away the homes of New Orleans jazz musicians, Wendy Oxenhorn showed up with love—and instruments

Wendy Oxenhorn was 18 when she made her first—and last—call to a suicide hotline. Despairing over a knee injury that had put an end to dreams of becoming a ballerina, she wound up listening sympathetically as the telephone counselor opened up about her own troubles. Oxenhorn realized compassion was her calling and three days

later began working the phones at the hotline. "You know how the universe works," she says. "Something drops into our lap."

Another twist of fate—the devastation wrought by Katrina—has brought Oxenhorn her latest mission. As executive director of the Jazz Foundation of America, she recently delivered





"We have a very spiritual connection," says Turbinton (dancing with Oxenhorn in Lafayette, La., Sept. 15). "She is God-sent."

\$70,000 worth of donated musical instruments to a dozen New Orleans jazzmen who escaped the city with their lives intact but their livelihoods shattered. "I thought, 'I have to do something,'" Oxenhorn says. "These are people who are there in our greatest moments of joy and our deepest moments of sadness. They get us through life."

Started in 1989, the Jazz Foundation originally focused on keeping the music form alive. But under the inspired leadership of Oxenhorn, who took over in 2000, the emphasis has shifted to directly helping people who have given their lives to a career that, too often, comes with no health insurance or financial safety net: the longtime Sinatra sideman who lost his apartment after a bout with pneumonia, the songwriter who wrote lyrics for Muddy Waters but ended up without food on her table. With a budget this year of \$580,000, raised in part through benefit concerts at New York City's famed Apollo Theatre, the foundation "is the answer to a lot of prayers," says guitarist Jimmy "Bean" Ballero, who received \$650 for temporary shelter after the storm.

The willowy Brooklyn-born Oxenhorn seems to have little in common with the veteran musicians she serves.

Yet she is well-acquainted with hardship. After working for nonprofit groups, including one for homeless people and another for children of addicts, the divorced mother of two teenage daughters, Sky and Montana, briefly earned her living by playing harmonica for tips at subway stations. "I could make \$150 at rush hour and be home in time to make dinner," she says. She discovered her own musical talent after splitting with a composer who left behind his harmonica. "Instead of the suicide hotline, I picked up the harmonica and played the blues," Oxenhorn says.

A harmonica was also a gift she gave to saxophonist Earl Turbinton Jr., known to fans as the African Cowboy. Though he once played with B.B. King, Turbinton turned to Oxenhorn's group for medical assistance after having two strokes and bypass surgery in 2004. He and Wendy became fast friends over the phone, but it wasn't until Sept. 15 in Lafayette, La., where Turbinton and other musicians relocated, that the two met face-to-face. Turbinton's eyes welled up as he took Oxenhorn into his arms. "She has her heart in it," he says. "You can feel it."

By Nancy Jeffrey. Steve Barnes in Lafayette

For more information, contact [www.jazzfoundation.org](http://www.jazzfoundation.org)

## MUSIC MEN

### EARL J. "THE AFRICAN COWBOY" TURBINTON JR.

A LEGEND'S AILING HEART SILENCED HIS SAX



Turbinton played with the greats—B.B. King, Herbie Hancock—and mentored dozens of younger jazz musicians. "My

house, on weekends, it was a dormitory," says Turbinton, 63. But that ended when he suffered two strokes in '02 and had quadruple-bypass surgery.

Turbinton couldn't pay for the drugs he needed until the Jazz Foundation helped him enroll in drug-company programs that provide free medication. "With Wendy, there was no red tape," says Turbinton's daughter Denise, who first called the foundation. Oxenhorn provided another vital service: She called up to three times a week to chat about his health and gossip about the jazz scene. Hooked up to a portable oxygen tank, Turbinton is not yet well enough to play sax. Still, he can manage a few bars on his harmonica—a gift Oxenhorn sent to help him exercise his lungs. "She is so sensitive," Turbinton says. "She's cosmically ordained."

### JIMMY "BEAN" BALLERO

A HELPING HAND, AND HE'S BACK IN BUSINESS



When Katrina unleashed her fury, Ballero, 52, concentrated on getting his mother, Nina, 82 and in a wheelchair, to safety—and left

behind a \$50,000 collection of guitars and basses. With bills coming in but no way for Ballero to earn money, Oxenhorn stepped in with \$650, enough to pay a month's rent on a house in Lafayette for him and his mother. Now Ballero's back to lining up gigs: "You're a musician," he says. "You gotta make music."