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Jazz Fanfare for a New New Orleans

By NATE CHINEN

NEW ORLEANS — “It was hard coming back here, man,” Terence Blanchard said one recent morning in his mother’s house, in the Pontchartrain Park neighborhood here. The house was empty and uncluttered, its renovation nearly complete, a far cry from the sodden wreckage that had greeted Mr. Blanchard and his mother, Wilhelmina, when they first returned weeks after Hurricane Katrina. Back then Mr. Blanchard offered what consolation he could. “This is all stuff that can be rebuilt,” he said, in a reassuring tone.

That initial visit, and especially the staggering despair of Mrs. Blanchard, made for one of the more poignant scenes in “When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts,” the 2006 HBO documentary directed by Spike Lee. “In fact,” Mr. Lee said by telephone the day the film’s six Emmy nominations were announced, “when we shot that scene, I stayed outside. I couldn’t go inside the house.”

Of course Mr. Blanchard — the acclaimed jazz trumpeter and bandleader and the composer responsible for almost all of Mr. Lee’s film scores, including “Levees” — had no such choice. And judging by the assessment of some of his colleagues, “going inside” is in keeping with his temperament as a musician.

“He’s not afraid to reach into those dark corners that we don’t know about and illuminate them,” the pianist Herbie Hancock said. “And he does it with gusto. He means it. You can tell by the way it feels.”

Now, coming up on Katrina’s second anniversary, Mr. Blanchard, 45, is ushering in two projects that reflect both his deep commitment to New Orleans and his conviction that stuff can in fact be rebuilt. The effort has significance partly because Mr. Blanchard has spent most of his career building a name elsewhere: he has also scored dozens of films by other directors, and his international stature as a top-shelf jazz artist dovetails with a reputation for accessible innovation. In some ways disaster prompted Mr. Blanchard to bring it all back home.

The first project is “A Tale of God’s Will (A Requiem for Katrina),” his impressive new album for Blue Note, due out on Tuesday. In a purposeful convergence of his film-composer and jazz-musician identities, it interweaves Mr. Blanchard’s “Levees” music with new compositions for his band and a 40-piece string orchestra. The result is a melancholy suite that feels both intensely personal and broadly cinematic.

With heavy-hearted themes like “Funeral Dirge” and “Wading Through,” some dark corners are illuminated. The cover depicts Mr. Blanchard on his mother’s roof, in stark silhouette.

The second project involves the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance, a graduate-level education program based for the last dozen years at the University of Southern California. As the program’s artistic director, Mr. Blanchard helped broker its move to Loyola University New Orleans, where a new class of students will begin its first semester next week. The relocation means that the city that gave birth to jazz (and, much later, to Mr. Blanchard) can now claim one of the art’s most progressive institutions.

During a two-day interval between out-of-town commitments, Mr. Blanchard guided a visitor around his New Orleans, to places like the Magazine Po-Boy Shop, for lunch; the Maple Leaf Bar, for a late-night set by the Rebirth Brass Band; and the Still Perkin’ cafe, where his wife and manager, Robin Burgess, kept a watchful eye as their daughters, Sidney, 10, and Jordan, 8, ducked into an adjacent bookstore.

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At the restored home of his aunt Alice Douglas and her husband, the Rev. Andrew Douglas, a few blocks from the London Avenue Canal, he visited his mother. Mrs. Blanchard, a small, no-nonsense woman, owned up to a sort of celebrity since “Levees” was broadcast. Her son confirmed it: “Everywhere I go, people recognize me not because I play the trumpet. They recognize me because of her.”

Mrs. Blanchard retorted with a laugh, “It’s about time.”

Her son said, “The thing I’ve been telling everybody is that if you cry for her, you’ve got to cry for about a hundred thousand other people that went through the same thing.”

Afterward, at his mother’s house, Mr. Blanchard recalled his upbringing as an only child. His father, Joseph Oliver Blanchard, was an insurance company manager and part-time opera singer who encouraged his son’s early classical training. “This is where I had to practice the piano every day,” he said, indicating a corner of the den. “Right next to the window, while the other kids were outside playing ball.”

Before heading to the Northeast to attend Rutgers in 1980, Mr. Blanchard studied at the New Orleans Center of Creative Arts, where he met the alto saxophonist Donald Harrison Jr. Together they would later succeed their former classmates Wynton and Branford Marsalis as the front line of Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, then regarded as jazz’s premier finishing school. Mr. Blanchard and Mr. Harrison would also form their own quintet, releasing a handful of heralded albums.

“All those guys were living in my neighborhood,” Mr. Lee recalled. “They had all moved up from New Orleans to Fort Greene, Brooklyn. Wynton was there, Branford was there, Terence was there, Donald Harrison. So my father, Bill Lee, managed to give these young jazz musicians some experience working on a film score.”

The film was “Mo’ Better Blues” (1990), starring Denzel Washington as a jazz trumpeter who bears some resemblance to Mr. Blanchard. (The opening scene, set in childhood, finds him stuck at the piano while his friends head off to play ball.) Mr. Blanchard played the film’s trumpet parts and, at the director’s invitation, contributed a theme.

In the studio, Spike Lee said, “my father handed the music back to Terence and said, ‘You wrote it, you conduct it.’ Terence has been doing my scores ever since.”

Mr. Blanchard’s success as a film composer has led some musicians and critics to underestimate his seriousness in jazz. (Before he signed with Blue Note in 2003, his solo albums were issued on the Sony Classical label.) But his working band has been a crucible of talent: two former members, the guitarist Lionel Loueke and the pianist Aaron Parks, each recently landed their own Blue Note contracts. Few things seem to make Mr. Blanchard prouder than his current group with the bassist Derrick Hodge, the tenor saxophonist Brice Winston, the drummer Kendrick Scott and, now, the pianist Fabian Almazan.

“A Tale of God’s Will,” like the album “Flow” before it, includes one song apiece by each young band member. Mr. Winston, a former New Orleans resident, contributed a haunting lament, “In Time of Need.” Mr. Hodge, a budding film composer who helped with the “Levees” score, lent his anthem “Over There.” Mr. Parks, then still in the band, wrote a sonorous piece called “Ashé.” Mr. Scott brought in “Mantra,” with his own orchestration. (“You wrote it, you conduct it,” he was told.)

For his cultivation of these players, Mr. Blanchard is often likened to Art Blakey. A better analogy might be Miles Davis, whose young quintet of the mid-1960s featured compositions by all of its members and absorbed their characteristics.

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Mr. Hancock, a member of that group, endorses the idea. "They're able to take these compositions," he said of the musicians, "and immediately translate them into the particular sound of Terence's band, which in many ways reminds me of what used to happen with Miles."

The comparison would end there, if not for some Davis-like nonmusical interests. Mr. Blanchard sped through the city in his jet-black Porsche Carrera, and giddily described a recent spin around a racetrack in a vintage Ferrari. And at the Freret Street Gym he stepped into the ring to train with the two-time world kickboxing champion Steven (Spyder) Hemphill.

"The thing I like about this guy, he's technical," Mr. Hemphill said after Mr. Blanchard had landed a volley of four-punch combinations. "He wants to know why." (For the record: In a Davis-Blanchard fight, the smart money would probably be on Mr. Blanchard.)

The mentorship ethos that guides Mr. Blanchard's band is also central to the Monk Institute, which established its two-year performance program in 1995. Unique in jazz education, it admits just seven students at a time, bringing them into regular contact not only with Mr. Blanchard but also legends like Mr. Hancock, the institute's chairman. Each class works as a band and participates in an outreach with area high schools. Among the program's success stories is Mr. Loueke.

When the institute's contract was ending at U.S.C., a number of prestigious universities indicated their interest. Mr. Blanchard campaigned for Loyola, where he met his first trumpet teacher and gave his senior recital, partly on the basis of its existing commitment to music. Of course its location had some resonance too.

"It's a means for us to give back to the community, and to have this continuing love affair with the city," he said of the move, during an impromptu tour of the facilities. "But to do it in this way in particular is what I'm most proud of, because we're not trying to create something from scratch. We're taking something that has already worked, and bringing it here. It's like putting a beautiful orchid in some seriously fertilized soil."

That metaphor could apply to Mr. Blanchard. It's been more than 25 years since he left New Orleans to pursue his career, more than a decade since he moved back to be near his two other children, Terence and Olivia, after his first marriage ended.

Now, though he keeps an apartment in Los Angeles and tours often, his roots have clearly been reinforced. He knows well the problems still facing New Orleans — a natural topic of conversation at dinner with Garland Robinette, the talk-radio host who famously broadcast through the storm — but he's committed to its renewal.

Together with Ms. Burgess and their daughters, he awaits the renovation of their new house uptown, which will include a cavernous attic studio, soundproofed and wired, where he can work on film music. It will be a five-minute walk from the Monk Institute, where he sees at least one facet of the city's future brimming with promise.