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In a National Park Devoted To Jazz, The Rangers Are Musicians

By Jennifer Bain
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Halfway through a one-hour set, the Arrowhead Jazz Band stops for 15 minutes and invites questions from the audience. It's an unusual move from an even more unusual band made up partly of park rangers.

When they applied to work at New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, did these musical rangers audition or just interview, we want to know. Why is there a national park devoted to jazz? Are they hiring? Are there other cities they like to play in or visit to hear music?

"I just love New Orleans. There's no place like here, truly," pianist Jade Perdue replies to that last question. "So if I had to pick a place — I can't even answer that. I can't pick another city. I don't know another place where you can find good music at 2 p.m. in the afternoon."

Indeed, this free concert in the New Orleans Jazz Museum's third-floor performance venue starts at 2 p.m. on a Tuesday in May. But not only is Perdue the band leader and a versatile vocalist/instrumentalist, she's an interpretive park ranger who goes by the informal title "jazz ranger" and is sporting her National Park Service uniform on stage.

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The National Park Service helped fund renovations to the third floor performance space at the New Orleans Jazz Museum, where the Arrowhead Jazz Band made up of park rangers and local musicians performs each week/Jennifer Bain

Named for the Park Service emblem, the Arrowhead Jazz Band is an ever-flowing musical institution that brings together park rangers and local musicians. Today Perdue is joined by fellow jazz rangers Hunter Miles Davis on drums and Kerry Lewis on bass, NPS intern Saskia Walker on vocals, local guitarist Max Bronstein and local saxophonist Gladney (who goes by one name).

About 50 of us have found the museum where the French Quarter meets the Frenchman Street live music corridor. It's just a 15-minute walk from the Decatur Street visitor center that's shared by New Orleans Jazz and Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve.

So why is there a national park devoted to jazz?

It's because Congress designated jazz "a rare and valuable national American treasure" in 1987 and said it should be "preserved, understood and promulgated." Since New Orleans is widely recognized as the birthplace of jazz, the park was created here in 1994. As the management plan notes, "the interpretation of music is different from interpretation at most other Park Service areas; it will require developing creative approaches to convey the story of jazz to the public."

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New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park ranger Jade Perdue, left, leads the Arrowhead Jazz Band in a free afternoon show at the New Orleans Jazz Museum/Jennifer

The park's mission, explains Perdue, is to "instill a public appreciation for the history and culture of jazz music and as well be a global leader in promoting and protecting this rich American art form." The focus is on the origins, early history and progression of jazz in New Orleans.

There's nothing like New Orleans Jazz in the Park Service, except for perhaps Wolf Trap National Park for the Performing Arts in Virginia where multiple amphitheaters present seasonal performances.

"I wasn't born when the first jazz rangers came about, but I'm lucky to be here now," says Perdue, who did two internships here before landing a full-time gig. "If y'all are interested, you can check us out at nps.gov/jazz."

Walker weighs in to say that even interns must audition. "It's the only national park dedicated to conserving an art form and so we don't have expertise in conserving land, we have expertise in the music and so you have to be a musician to be a jazz ranger."

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At the French Quarter visitor center shared by New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park and Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve, a sandwich board details daily activities in New Orleans/Jennifer Bain

As for jobs, we're encouraged to check out USAJobs.gov for permanent, seasonal and volunteer openings plus internships. "Thank y'all so much for your wonderful questions," says Perdue to wrap up the Q&A. "We're going to continue with some more music."

The rollicking eight-song set ranges from "Walking to New Orleans" by Fats Domino and "Tiny Bubbles" by Don Ho to "Swinging at the Haven" by Ellis Marsalis Jr. and "Going Back to New Orleans" by Joe Liggins.

We're allowed to take photos and videos and the band graciously lingers so we can take a group shot. Before the musicians retreat, I grab a few words with Davis, who also started with an NPS internship.

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"Musicianship requires a lot of vulnerability and so whenever I'm creating with these fellow musicians on stage, I'm in my most vulnerable state," the drummer admits. "Being a musician and being able to separate work and artistry is difficult because even after the sets we play today, I've got to go back to work."

Today's 8:30 a.m. shift started with private time rehearsing and preparing for other upcoming musical demonstrations. It continued with this concert and will wrap up at 5 p.m. after two final hours of music.

"I'm actually about to go back and practice some more," Davis confides. "I'm just in the mood to play music."

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On Decatur Street in the French Quarter of New Orleans, the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park shares a visitor center with Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve/Jennifer Bain

It's my second trip to New Orleans and since I've already eaten beignets from Café du Monde, made a pilgrimage to Central Grocery & Deli for a muffuletta sandwich and bar-hopped along Bourbon Street, my priority is seeing how the NPS intersects with the Big Easy.

I'm at the visitor center when it opens at 9:30 a.m. and have time to look around before Conservation Legacy intern Garrett Kirkland gives a talk about his work making education videos and curriculum with four federally recognized tribes.

The center — which naturally boasts a piano — is in the French Quarter, one of the world's most distinctive architectural districts and one that blends hundreds of years of French, Spanish, Caribbean, West African and American influences.

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Garrett Kirkland, a Conservation Legacy intern at the NPS, gives a talk at the French Quarter visitor center shared by Jean Lafitte and New Orleans Jazz national historical parks. He stands beside the center's piano as he talks about his work with federally recognized tribes/Jennifer Bain

From interpretive panels, I learn how shortly after the French founded New Orleans in 1718, engineers drew up a formal city plan for Nouvelle Orleans — the area now called the French Quarter. The city evolved into an important American port, and people from around the world mingled with the early inhabitants and created a distinct culture rich in food, music and tradition.

"As the waterfront bustled with cotton, sugar, and lumber shipping, this block of the French Quarter gradually changed from residential to commercial," signage explains. People once shopped at open-air meat and vegetable markets nearby and traded at street-level stores in two townhouses on this site. After the Civil War, candy factories operated here as Louisiana-grown sugar was processed in nearby refineries.

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The French Quarter visitor center has NPS passport cancellation stamps for Jean Lafitte and New Orleans Jazz national historical parks/Jennifer Bain

In 1989, the Decatur Street site was purchased for a visitor center for Jean Lafitte, which has six sites scattered across Louisiana that preserve natural and cultural heritage of the lower Mississippi Delta region. New Orleans Jazz operated from its own modest visitor center for a spell, but the units combined forces during the pandemic.

The closest Jean Lafitte site is about 18 miles south of New Orleans — but I'll have to visit Barataria Preserve on my next trip to see how it protects 26,000 acres of wild wetlands with bayous, swamps, marshes and forests.

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In the French Quarter of New Orleans, ranger Karen Armagost works at the combined visitor center for New Orleans Jazz and Jean Lafitte national historical parks/Jennifer Bain

Instead, I chat with ranger Karen Armagost, who explains that while the center has more signage about Jean Lafitte, musical performances happen daily, sometimes in the lush courtyard or an air-conditioned space, other times at the state-run jazz museum. The NPS paid half the cost to renovate the museum's state-of-the-art performance space, which is set up to do live streaming.

"Often people come in here and ask 'Where is the park?' They visualize a big outdoor park — a traditional national park," says Armagost. "We try to educate them about the fact that the term park is all encompassing of historic places and cultural places."

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Blink and you'll miss the entrance to the visitor center for New Orleans Jazz and Jean Lafitte national historical parks. It's on a busy street in the French Quarter of New Orleans/Jennifer Bain

I learn how the seeds of jazz were sowed in places like Congo Square in Armstrong Park, where enslaved Africans could meet, dance and play music. Jazz was also heard in Creole homes and in the streets where marching bands paraded before it "took root in the dance halls and smoky clubs of New Orleans, and from there spread to the entire world."

In a small section devoted to jazz, folk, brass bands and rhythm and blues, I read that when a jazz musician dies, fellow players follow the hearse to the cemetery to celebrate the soul's entry into heaven.

This being New Orleans, there are Cajun and Creole cookbooks in the gift shop, and nods to food throughout the center. One popular saying jumps out at me: "There are two times of day in Louisiana — mealtime and in between." My park visit comes between eating bread pudding at Desire Oyster Bar & Restaurant in the Royal Sonesta, making a chicken and Andouille sausage gumbo at the Mardi Gras School of Cooking, and trying my first alligator jerky from one of the French Quarter's ubiquitous gift shops.

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A family of avid NPS-goers from Oklahoma checks out the small section on music at the back of the shared visitor center for New Orleans Jazz and Jean Lafitte national historical parks/Jennifer Bain

The park's gift shop doesn't sell jerky but it does stock CDs starring the Arrowhead Jazz Band or produced by the park. On *Songs for Junior Rangers*, "I Wanna Be a Park Ranger" sadly doesn't mention the jazz rangers but does detail how the job lets you "protect the wonders of the nation."

One of the jazz rangers appears just before I leave, so I pepper him with questions. Kerry Lewis shares how he is a New Orleans-born war vet and bass player who has been a musician all his life.

When I ask if a NPS audience differs from, say, a typical New Orleans bar crowd, he says absolutely. Partly it's because the NPS audience always gets to do a question-and-answer period with the band. But, he adds, "the place I normally play in the evenings, the audience, that's their purpose. The entertainment is not a sidebar and not a secondary purpose."

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Jazz ranger Kerry Lewis stands in the French Quarter courtyard of the visitor center for New Orleans Jazz and Jean Lafitte national historical parks. He plays bass in the Arrowhead Jazz Band, which sometimes performs in the leafy courtyard/Jennifer Bain

I don't probe about the unnamed place where he plays at night, and soon enjoy watching the uniform-clad Lewis radiate joy during the Arrowhead Jazz Band's museum show.

A few hours later, I arrive at Preservation Hall for a 6:15 show. Each night, the intimate venue draws from a collective of 50-plus masters of traditional New Orleans jazz musicians for multiple 45-minute acoustic performances by the Preservation All-Stars.

I squeeze onto a bench with my friends and turn off my cell as directed by a sign that says "No photos or recording. We'd love to share this experience with you, not your telephone."

Six musicians take their places at the front of the room. Wouldn't you know it? The quiet fellow on bass, now wearing street clothes instead of a federal uniform, is none other than Lewis. There's no Q+A for this show, so I sit back and lose myself in the music.

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