

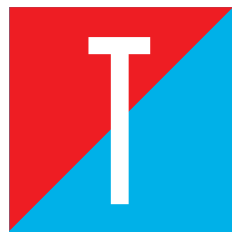
KILLER

Their joyous brass cover of “Sexual Healing” is set to be one of the tracks of the summer but success has come at a high price for The Hot 8 Brass Band of New Orleans

BLOWS

BY MORRIS KESSLER





here's nothing like a blast of horns to clear your head. It's Sunday night in Shoreditch, but it feels like New Year's Eve in New Orleans. The 1000-capacity Village Underground, a cavernous, bricked-out pit, is rammed, sweaty and sticky, its London crowd going bananas for brass. Bringing the noise onstage are eight men playing for their lives which, when you hear their story, make sense.

Forget NWA and their tall tales of gang-banging and bank-robbing — The Hot 8 Brass Band have been through more trauma than any band could imagine, and glorifying it is not their business. Four of their members have died, including two murders (maybe three, depending on if you believe the New Orleans Police Department's version of events or not, but more of that later), they've struggled through Hurricane Katrina, and one of their trumpet players lost his legs in a horrific car accident. Times have been dark, but The Hot 8 move on, honouring the dead through their music, a raucous, brassy din of jazz, funk and hip-hop. Tonight, Shoreditch is shaking, in thrall to a band giving it all they've got.



Rewind a few hours and I sit down in a room below the stage with Bennie Pete, Hot 8's band leader and tuba player, for a humbling hour of personal history. The basement is small and low-lit, with light jazz melting out of a laptop on a table, around which, on an armchair and sofa, three of the band are slumped. They flew in from New Orleans a few hours ago, and as the tour manager





leads me in, they're all asleep. He gently wakens Bennie Pete, who stirs in the armchair opposite me and, half in slumber, introduces himself.

To my left, zonked on a sofa, is trumpet player Raymond Williams, who sleeps throughout the interview, as does bass drummer Harry Cook, a man-mountain who is practically horizontal next to Williams. Cook wakes up, says hi, cracks a joke and falls promptly back to sleep, snoring substantially louder than Bennie Pete's softly-spoken tones. I later discover Cook's nickname is "Swamp Thing". His cacophonous snoring tickles Pete. "They gonna think we did this interview at the zoo," he laughs, presuming the audio will be uploaded. "All type of things in the background. Bears and lions..."

There are around 13 members of The Hot 8, although only eight of them travel at any one time, and various

members come in and out of the room as we talk. At 6ft 6in, Bennie Pete is a gentle giant, and, along with Cook, was one of the founders of the band 20 years ago. It takes him 10 minutes to properly wake up, but he talks from the heart throughout.

Pete grew up around music, his mum singing along to the radio while she cooked. At church, where his grandfather was a pastor, he got into gospel. Like

practically all of the Hot 8, he started out in a school marching band. Later, some friends who needed a tuba player persuaded him to join their new brass band, the Looney Toones. “We had a lot of energy,” he says. “Marching bands are big, 150, 200 people, it’s hard to be recognised amongst all of that — they might have 10 tubas, 30 trumpets. With a smaller version, a brass band, you get to show yourself. It was fun, it was just something that happened and kind of grew on me, and we went to doing better

performances, better gigs, getting known.”

In 1994, with members of the Looney Toones dispersing, Pete formed a new band with some of its members as well as refugees from another band, the Highsteppers. The Hot 8 quickly became a local draw, the town never short of a party for them to play at. “They throw down in New Orleans all the time,” he says. “Anything. The most bizarre thing I saw, they had a second line [street parade] for a dog that died. He was a popular dog for one of the popular musicians and they threw a big second line parade through the streets for

“They throw down in
New Orleans all the
time. The most bizarre
thing: a street parade
for a dog that died”



him. They'd make a reason to party. People cooking good seafood, it was nice. So we attached ourselves to all of that, and people would hire us.

"We started out practising in the park once we got out of school. People were getting off work, and they'd hear the horns and get some crawfish and beer, and check us out. And the crowds started getting bigger and bigger. We started getting more serious about our music, and there'd be so many people watching us, and they started requesting tunes. They wanted a free party, which was fine because it was exciting and it kept our energy going. But then we started doing local festivals, French Quarter fairs, jazz festivals, corporate gigs and private gigs. We wanted to play overseas, it was on our mind, it was a vision already."



Tragedy struck early. In 1996, Jacob Johnson, the Hot 8's 17-year-old trumpet player, was tied up at home and shot in the head. Then, in 2004, 28-year-old trombone player Demond Dorsey died on his kitchen floor, of either a heart attack or an overdose depending on who you listen to. Two months after that, another of the band's trombone players, 22-year-old Joseph Williams, was killed by police as he was driving to meet the band at a church for a funeral gig. The NOPD claimed the truck he was driving was stolen, and that when they told him to stop, he reversed into one of them and hit their car before attempting to drive away, provoking them into opening fire. Eyewitnesses said Williams did not drive forward and had his hands in the air before they shot him, and that he



“We went to play at the evacuation shelters and it was amazing: we just jumped out the car and blasted away”

fell out of the truck with his hands up. Members of the Hot 8 heard about it and rushed to the scene where they found him dying on the street, nine bullets in his body. “He was killed,” said Pete at the time, “like an animal.”

The next year, Katrina hit, decimating the city. The band scattered, evacuating out of harm’s way. Pete, who had gone to Atlanta, returned as soon as people were allowed back, and almost as soon as he’d begun getting his damaged house back together, he started getting the band back together. Eager to help their community, they started playing impromptu free gigs. “We went to play at the evacuation shelters, for the people, and it was amazing,” says Pete. “We just showed up, jumped out of the car and blasted away. And people came running to us and made a little second line and we marched around. At the same time there were military police with guns, a lot of people from all over the world who had come down to help out.

They were wondering what was going on with this band, but they saw that it was for the people, and they embraced it. It was a beautiful thing. And there was a lot of media there, CNN and all these people, taping it. And we did a few interviews and the next thing you knew we were on the road.”

The Hot 8 wound up in New York playing for a Halloween parade in New York, and in the hotel lobby the next morning, Pete recognised Spike Lee. “He was looking at us, and we approached him and he said he was doing a documentary on New Orleans. I told him we were from



TOP BRASS

See the band play their version of Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing", from the film *Chef*



there and we evacuated. We told him what we were doing, and he was like, 'Man, you're not leaving my sight, you stay with me.'" Lee was making *When The Levees Broke*, his epic four-hour documentary on the effects of the storm on the city, and got the band involved in the film. Things were looking up again, says Pete, but a few months later, in April 2006, trumpet player Terrell Batiste got a blowout on the freeway, got out of the truck to fix it, and was hit.

When he came to a few seconds later, he was lying on the ground. He prayed for survival, if only for his mother, who had lost her own mother in Katrina. He tried to get over to his girlfriend, who was freaking out in the truck, but couldn't get up. He looked down to see one of his legs a few yards away, and the other hanging by a thread.

The band was on the road; Batiste had been unable to join them when the accident happened. "We all was terrified," remembers Pete. "We were dealing with Katrina, then having to deal with Terrell going through that. We didn't know he was going to make it. We were scared, we didn't know what was going on." Batiste lost both legs, but after three months in intensive care, he got through his trauma and depression, and was determined

“Everything worked, it was a blessing, magic. That was the beauty of us going through the tragedy of the storm

to get back on track. When they’d first come to visit him in hospital, he’d immediately asked Pete if he could still be in the band. “Man, you tripping,” laughed an astounded Pete, adding, “I wouldn’t even be worrying about no band if I was you,” before assuring him that yes, if he could still play, of course he could still be in the band. During the gigs they played while Batiste was still in hospital, the band would call him, placing the phone on the stage so he

could hear the shows. He was back with them, playing in his wheelchair, within five months of the accident.

Pete, though, was reaching breaking point himself. New Orleans, and all the troubles the band had endured, had been chipping away at his spirit, and he wanted to move. Ironically, it was yet another tragedy that changed his mind.

On December 28, The Hot 8’s snare drummer and main songwriter, 25-year-old Dinerral Shavers, was shot dead in his car, in what was assumed to be a gang-related killing. Police speculated that the bullet, which entered the back of Shavers’s head, was meant for his stepson. He managed to drive a further four blocks before stopping, and died within an hour of being taken to hospital. For the sake of keeping his band together and honouring Shavers, Pete resolved to stay in New Orleans.

Thanks to the media coverage during the Katrina aftermath and their appearance in *When the Levees Broke*, the damaged but determined Hot 8 were gathering steam. UK record label Tru Thoughts heard their stupendous



cover of Marvin Gaye’s “Sexual Healing”, a fan favourite, and signed them immediately. In Autumn 2007 their debut album, *Rock With the Hot 8*, was released to much acclaim. “Everything kind of worked,” says Pete, who, i seems, always tries to find a silver lining. “It was a blessing, magic. That was the beauty of us going through the tragedy of the storm.”



The Hot 8’s profile has been building ever since. In 2010, they were asked to appear in *Treme*, *The Wire* creator David Simon’s TV drama about Katrina’s aftermath. Executives wanted to feature the band and tell Shavers’s story, but Pete declined, having been unhappy with their approach. “It was still new to us, still fresh to us,” he says. “It was like being invaded by Hollywood, coming to get our story. We wasn’t sure that they were gonna present it right to the world.”

Some time later, however, Simon made a personal call to Pete and invited him to lunch. “He apologised,” says Pete. “He said, ‘I’m sorry. Whatever happened, whoever called you from my office, I’m sorry how that went, but this is what we wanna do.’” Pete directed Simon to speak with Dinerral’s mum, and he talked to her too: “I said if she wanted it to happen it would happen.” She gave her blessing, and Shavers’s story was told over a couple of episodes, with the band appearing and performing at his funeral, as they had done in reality.

In 2011, the band supported Lauryn Hill on tour and played as her horn section, and in 2012, their album *The Life & Times Of* was Grammy-nominated. They followed



How rain can actually improve your Glastonbury
Internet required





(BIG) EASY DOES IT
Hot 8 on a “second line”
in New Orleans

that with last year’s *Tombstone*, which lyrically honoured their fallen comrades and garnered serious acclaim. This month, their “Sexual Healing” cover prominently features in *Chef*, Jon Favreau’s terrific film about a burgeoning food truck business.

When Pete and the band aren’t touring the world representing their city, they offer hands-on support to their people in New Orleans. As anti-violence campaigners, they’re active in the Silence is Violence group that was set up after Dinerral Shavers’s murder. They’re also encouraging the next generation to make a living through music, playing for schools and teaching kids about brass band history and culture. It’s tough though, admits Pete. “That whole inner-city situation, the



violence, the drugs, it's overwhelming. It's too much, versus the opportunity for them to hang out with us. We're losing a lot of our youth to senseless violence. They're dying. Every single day they're dying and going to jail. There's a lot of shit going on."

The homicide rate is high in New Orleans and it's been hard for The Hot 8, playing for their friends' birthdays, then their weddings, then their funerals. Has the hardship changed their approach to the music?

"Yeah, in a way," says Pete. "When reality strikes like that you can't really do nothin' but be stronger. We got stronger from it. We leaned on each other. The music has been there to help us. You have to rise to the occasion. And then you keep answering questions, being interviewed about it, you gotta keep reliving it. But on the other side you understand that people who aren't from New Orleans wanna know what we're going through, they're concerned. So it's our duty,


part of our job to be able to suck it up and deal with it, and spread it to the world. It hurts you on the inside to keep on reliving these situations but you owe it to your mates, to get their life stories out there as far as you can."

Last year's *Tombstone* album, he says, was an effort to put the troubles they've had to bed, "to get it all out, flush ourselves. To hit restart and show people who we are through all the tested times." The next album is about turning the page. "Yeah, we are the Hot 8 who went through these things, but we still here, and this is who we are after the storm. It'll be vibrant and fresh. We'll always

"We're losing a lot of our youth to senseless violence. They're dying. Every single day they're dying, and going to jail"



keep all the guys in the music. We have original tunes that some of those guys made that we didn't record, so they can still be here in the spirit of the music. Let them relive through the music. We lost four men. Back in the beginning, after practice we used talk about getting the chance to travel and play in front of thousands of people. We were waiting for those days to come to pass, and they lost their lives in the middle of us moving towards our goal. We know what their dreams and visions were, and that what's kept me playing to this day."

An hour after our interview, and dead on time, The Hot 8 hit the stage. They launch straight into their cover of Snoop's "What's My Name", immediately sending the crowd into a frenzy that doesn't abate for 90 minutes. Elation sears through the room. The band barely stops to breathe, breaking between songs perhaps three or four times. It's hard to imagine a better party going on anywhere else in the world. And at the same time, you feel honoured to be in the same room as these eight men, The Hot 8 Brass Band, playing like there's no tomorrow. 



BUY ALBUMS
Internet required

Chef is released in cinemas on 27 June