

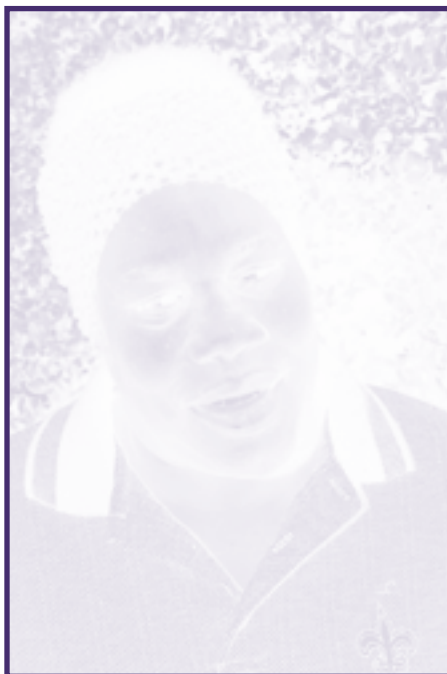
Mama Rebirth

Gospel Is Where it All Began

By Joan M. Wade

Many times we wonder who are the most influential people to our musical geniuses, supreme actors and creative poets. We also wonder how did they reach this focal point in their lives? Was it because of their parents and how they were reared? Or was it their inherited desire through their parents or a hobby groomed for greatness?

In the case of Phillip and Keith Frazier of the Rebirth Brass Band and Kerwin James of the New Birth Brass Band, part of it has to be the genes. These members of two of our most recognized brass bands inherited their talent for music from their mother, the matriarch of the Rebirth Brass Band, Mrs.



Barbara Jean James Frazier, also known as "Mama Rebirth".

Frazier has worked throughout her life in the gospel community and has played organ in a variety of churches throughout the New Orleans area. Her sons also captured the love of music by watching, listening and learning through her heart and soul.

Mama Rebirth is a genius in her own right. She is the mother of six children and eight grandchildren. As a widow, she was left to rear her children alone in the 9th ward. While raising her children, Frazier

instilled in them the main quality that her parents instilled in her- to love God first.

Barbara Frazier was born in West Feliciana Parish on March 10, 1944 and moved to New Orleans at a very early age. She grew up in the Carrollton area on South Murat Street. Her parents were Mr. Will James and Mrs. Juanita

Prout James. Her father was a lamplighter for the railroad and her mother was a cook in a restaurant.

Frazier remembers her parents telling her how she liked pretending she was playing the piano at the age of three. She recalled, "My mama had this old vanity and stool... I should (have) kept it.

They said I used to sit on that stool for hours playing like I was playing the piano and after that my father started me with music lessons."

She started music lessons at the age of four and music school at 5-years old. She studied under Miriam Purnell and Annabelle Jones. She was taught by private certified teachers and took the John Thompson course. Her greatest

influence in music was Sis. Lee from Nazerene Baptist Church. "When I was little, I always wanted to play like Sis. Lee; Sis. Lee played from the heart."

She considers herself to be a soul gospel musician, "I play how I feel- you ever heard Rebirth play, 'Just A Closer Walk With Thee?' They play it like no other band in the city play it, I taught them how to play it with soul."

Frazier was baptized at Sixth Union Baptist Church on Orleans Avenue and began to play for Sixth Union's Sunday School at the age 12 under Rev. Dave Dennis. She began branching out by playing for other churches at the age of fifteen.

Frazier graduated from Joseph S. Clark High School, the same institution that would incubate the Rebirth Brass Band twenty years later, in 1962 and began teaching music in 1965. She taught Janice Vaughn, Verdell Comeaux, Louis Torregano and many others, just to name a few.

Frazier's curriculum vitae includes a variety of churches that requested her services "back in the day" and now. In her early years, Mama Rebirth played for St. Luke, Antioch and Christian Mission Baptist Churches. She played organ and directed the choir at Mission for over 20 years.

Frazier actually retired from playing music after an illness, but came back into the industry 10 years ago and began playing for Mount Bethel Baptist Church. She celebrated her 10th year appreciation in March. It included her favorite musical selection, "I Walk With The Lord" and her

favorite bible verse- the 23rd Psalm.

Normally, when someone is appreciated, they are the ones being honored but at Mama Rebirth's appreciation, she honored others. This year she paid tribute to five ladies in her life- Cyril Afread, Irvonia Alfred, Millie Cosey, Bernice Rogers and Linda Tapp.

Frazier's vitae includes playing and singing for churches but also includes being on a panel for the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival Foundation and working for Werlein's Music Center that was formerly located on Canal Street. Frazier was Werlein's organ demonstrator in the late 1960s and early 70s. Her job entailed going to local churches and demonstrating the operation of the organ.

She is no longer demonstrating the operation of organs but she continues to demonstrate the greatest love of all: her love for God, family and gospel music. She says, "I had my fun, but all my life I've been in church and I know nothing else."

Mama Rebirth and her sons have been great pillars in the gospel and brass communities. They are wonderful models for showing us how to take a little of our past into our future. The gospel foundation that Mama Rebirth instilled in her children has given "birth" to the modern day era of New Orleans brass bands.

Maple Leaf Bar

tuesdays
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Brass
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