

## **Smoked Out**

**by Emilie Bahr**

There was a time when Pierre Pichon spent nearly every night of the week plying from the strings of his guitar the sounds that garnered his gypsy jazz band a faithful following at local music clubs. Today, his appearances are limited to a few private performances, agreed upon only once he is certain he won't spend hours in a smoke-filled venue.

The change began last Mardi Gras when the 40-year-old guitarist, formerly of the band Vavavoom, contracted a strain of the flu that put him on his back for almost a month. Alarmed by his body's vulnerability and hoping to hasten his recovery, he quit smoking and abandoned most of his regular gigs.

"The problem we have," Pichon said of city musicians, "is that whether we are smokers or not, it doesn't even matter. Playing five times a week in a smoky establishment, it will kill you, no matter what."

It's a message Bethany Bultman has heralded for 10 years as program director for the New Orleans Musicians' Clinic, a nonprofit that offers reduced-cost health care to performers.

Musicians, she said, "are working in the most hazardous environment I can think of. Lawyers don't go to work every day and have 35 people sitting on their desk blowing smoke at them."

Bultman's appeal to city music lovers goes like this: "Smoke outside. Smoke in your own house. Just don't blow it in the face of Sunpie Barnes."

Almost two years after the Louisiana Smoke Free Air Act took effect, banning smoking in restaurants but exempting freestanding bars and casinos, the volume is rising on calls to expand smoking restrictions.

In New Orleans, advocates of a more stringent public smoking policy are pinning their argument on the effects of secondhand smoke on one of the city's most prized assets: its musical culture.

The Louisiana Campaign for Tobacco-Free Living in August began airing spots on WWOZ 90.7 FM in support of smoke-free music venues.

John Butts, coordinator for the campaign's New Orleans region, said the spots highlight the need to protect the health of musicians and other service workers, "the people who really underpin the fabric of a lot of our economy and a lot of our livelihood here in New Orleans."

Bultman's group has helped build a coalition of musical interests whose focus is improving the environment in which musicians perform. The coalition has advertised in Offbeat Magazine and distributed flyers during Jazz Fest and Essence Festival promoting the city's smoke-free venues, places that have banned smoking in compliance with state law or of their own accord.

Bultman said the group next plans to amass a contingent of like-minded musicians to lobby other club owners to go smoke-free.

For years, she said, "we were wanting someone to come and make a law. What I think we've learned is that there were club owners who have decided that they will go smoke-free and the world has not come to an end."

Robert LeBlanc is one of the latest club owners to snub smoking at his Warehouse District club, The Republic. He enacted the ban in August.

"We wanted to try this a few years ago," LeBlanc said, "but it seemed really risky because we were much less established. We weren't sure we could rock the boat like that."

LeBlanc said the "deciding factor" in banning smoking was when some of his employees began to experience breathing problems because of smoke inhaled on the job. He said response to the change has been mostly positive.

If state Sen. Rob Marionneaux has his way, bars and other now-exempt venues throughout the state will have to follow suit. The Livonia Democrat, who was lead author of the Louisiana Smoke Free Air Act, hopes to bring an expanded smoking ban for vote as soon as next year.

"It's just a matter of the timing being right," Marionneaux said. "Of course, I'm term-limited after this term, so I've got to do something between now and then."

Not everyone is on board the anti-smoking bandwagon. Even some who agree their health would benefit fear the adverse effects on their bottom line.

"The smoke is an issue that is to me a very sensitive kind of a thing," said New Orleans musician Joe Krown, a nonsmoker. "Personally, smoking bothers me a lot, but having worked in night clubs and bars more than half my life, I realize part of the alcohol industry is based around smoking."

Krown, 50, worries banning smoking might mean smaller crowds and fewer tips.

"There's gonna be backlash and I can't afford backlash," he said.

Dave Clements similarly predicts a smoking ban would be bad for business at The Circle Bar.

"I have what's known as a late-night dive and people definitely come in and smoke," said Clements, owner of the Lee Circle watering hole. "My overall feeling is that if it's my business and I want to let people smoke, I should be able to."

Advocates point to other cities where music and bar scenes thrive despite smoking bans. They say some venues actually attract new business by virtue of their smoke-free status.

Bultman fears the city's smoky atmosphere might contribute to the decline of the local music scene.

"It encourages musicians to leave music," she said. "If every day you went into work, you stank when you came home, you would eventually say, 'I really think I want to go be something else.'"