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Big Tent: Everyone is accepted in circus arts; see demonstrations at Jazz Fest

BY SUE STRACHAN | sstrachan@theadvocate.com APR 30, 2019 - 9:00 AM

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Back by popular demand, it's "Under the Big Top! -Circus Arts in Louisiana," the second weekend of the 2019 New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival presented by Shell. Shown here is Adam Jones (a.k.a. Atom Jane).

Photo by Josh Brasted for NOJHF

When the big tents for Jazz Fest start going up on the New Orleans Fair Grounds Race Course, it's hard not to compare it to the circus coming to town.

The acts of varying genres and the anticipation of fans for the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival presented by Shell recall the childlike wonder at circus jugglers and tightrope walkers.

While early festgoers have a vague memory of a person who walked a tightrope over the infield duck pond in the 1980s, it wasn't until 2018 that the festival officially showcased circus arts in the Louisiana Folklife Village the second weekend of Jazz Fest.

It was a huge hit and is returning for 2019. "I had so much feedback about how people young and old loved it," said Rachel Ornelas, cultural heritage coordinator for Jazz Fest.

At the red-and-white striped "Under the Big Top" tent, spectators can see aerialists, jugglers and acrobats. Don't miss the equilibrists, who walk or dance atop a tightwire, balance on their hands or perch on a unicycle. Performers include Quentin Jackson, Adam Jones (stage name: Atom Jane), Gretchen Ernst, KO Duo (Kyran Walton and Oliver Layher) and the

International School of Louisiana BeauCoup Circus, headed by Meret Ryhiner. Dwayne “Dwaino” Walker will be on hand for clown arts.

When there isn't a show "Under the Big Top" there will be demonstrations, and of particular note, a timeline showcasing how New Orleans was once the “Circus Capital of the U.S.” in the early 20th century, according to Teresa Parker Farris, who is on the Jazz Fest folklife advisory panel after being its cultural programs manager for years.

A historian — she is getting her doctorate at Tulane University — Farris and Ornelas started digging and found a wealth of information. A bonus for Farris was that her great-uncle owned a circus that traveled throughout the South. “It's in my blood,” said Farris jokingly.

Included on the timeline is one of the first circuses in New Orleans: Around 1816, Cayetano Mariotini set up a resident circus in Place Publique or Place Cirque, better known today as Congo Square. Circuses flourished in the city. It was the perfect stop due to the location by the river and access to Gulf of Mexico, and it was easy to set up because it was flat, said Farris.

Throughout the 19th century, circuses could be found on boats in the Mississippi River — the “Floating Palace” for example — and in Lafayette Square, Audubon Park and the Fair Grounds, making the return at Jazz Fest a full circle.

At Jazz Fest in 2018, “many people enjoyed learning about the history of the circus in New Orleans,” said Ornelas, who admitted that she had always been fascinated with the circus. After attending a 2017 Smithsonian Folklife Festival that focused on circus arts, she came up with the idea of having a dedicated space for it at Jazz Fest.

But where to start in New Orleans?

Ornelas turned to Ryhiner, coordinator for the circus arts program at the International School of Louisiana. The school’s students and alumni had performed at the Jazz Fest’s Kids Tent for the past 14 years.

Circus arts is a passion for Ryhiner, who was an equilibrist in a circus for several years before a bad truck accident ended her performing career. She started teaching circus arts at the International School of Louisiana in 2005 through a Kid smART program.

Post-Hurricane Katrina, she was brought back to help coordinate a circus arts program, called a “social circus” because it aims to build community through positive experiences via noncompetitive circus arts activities that include a child with any ability. “It’s an accessible art form,” said Ryhiner.

Though met with some skepticism from parents — “Are you going to make cotton candy with my child?” Ryhiner recalled a parent asking — circus arts is now a beloved part of the school's curriculum, recognized by the American Youth Circus Organization as a social circus arts program that makes a difference.

And what better way to see the see the potential than "Under the Big Top" at Jazz Fest.

Under the Big Top

Louisiana Folklife Village at New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival presented by Shell

Thursday, May 2, to Sunday, May 5

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