



Interview with Wanda Rouzan

04/01/2013 by [Sue Strachan \(https://www.myneworleans.com/author/sue-strachan/\)](https://www.myneworleans.com/author/sue-strachan/)





Greg Miles Photographs

As one of New Orleans' best known performers, it isn't surprising that when you meet Wanda Rouzan in person or watch her perform that you receive a one-of-a-kind education in New Orleans music.

With a career spanning more than 50 years, Rouzan has worked with a varied cast of talented New Orleanians – including Lee Dorsey, Vernel Bagneris, Ricky Graham and Becky Allen. She refers to her fellow performers often by a first-name basis: Wynton, for example. And, after speaking to her, you realize that there really isn't one facet of New Orleans music that she hasn't embraced or put her distinct Rouzan touch upon: jazz, R&B, gospel, even second-line, as she's one of the few female grand marshals.

Being schooled, in this sense, is a good thing (and it isn't surprising to find out that she teaches theater arts when not performing).

Here is where you can find Wanda Rouzan this month:

French Quarter Festival: Wanda Rouzan and A Taste of New Orleans; New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, Fri., April 26: The New Orleans R&B Diva Revue featuring The Dixie Cups, Jean Knight and Wanda Rouzan with the Brian Querzergue Band; and Thurs., May 2, part of the ensemble in Vernel Bagneris presents the 35th Anniversary Show of One Mo' Time.

How and when did you start performing?

My two sisters – Laura and Barbara – and I grew up singing. We used to do it while sitting on the porch at home, around the neighborhood, in talent shows. Anytime they would slip us a microphone, because we did that harmony – you have to teach it now, but it came naturally to us.

We had a lot of groups – boys and girls – that came up during that time [the early 1960s]. The Dixie Cups, for example.

Was anyone in particular a mentor to you as a performer?

My older sister, Laura. She's always been there for me.

Your nickname is Huckle-Buck ...?

When I was a little-bitty thing, my mother would send my sisters and I around to the corner to get a poor boy or something. We walked or rode bikes and Laura would have me sing for a huckle-buck or a snowball.

It's a frozen cup and I've loved them all my life. My mom would make them. You don't get them now, so I make them.

Tell me about The Rouzan Sisters (Laura, Wanda and Barbara).

Laura was writing [music] a lot; she was in college. I had just gotten into high school and we met Connie LaRocca, who owned Frisco Records and a chicken shack that was well known at the time.

LaRocca had a couple other acts, such as Wardell Quezergue, who was doing the arranging for everyone. We recorded background for Frisco Records artists. We recorded "Men of War," which was about the war in Vietnam, and it became No. 1 on the charts in New Orleans. We were learning about the business, Laura was writing and we recorded one of her tracks. The record was released after "Men of War," but it had LaRocca's record label on it. And that ended that part of our career.

But we were still very visible. We were known throughout the region – went to Mississippi, Texas and all through Louisiana. Even went to Dallas to perform on a TV show. We played with Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, who was a bandleader then. I also performed with Lee Dorsey, the real R&B – I came up during the R&B era.

How did you get involved with One Mo' Time, which is celebrating it's 35th anniversary this year.

Vernal Bagneris, who's from New Orleans, called me to say he was going to put together a show of 1920s vaudeville, and would love for me to be part of it. It had become a hit at the Village Gate in New York City, and when it had moved to New York it needed a cast in New

Orleans to replace it. I was in the second cast in New Orleans. But we also toured all over Europe, as did the New York cast.

Such wonderful women, such as Juanita Brooks, were in the show and it all came about because of Vernel.

How did you end up as a performer and as a teacher?

I'm a trained speech pathologist – it's what I got my masters in at Penn State. I wound up coming back to work for some years, but all of a sudden I'm in plays and singing, touring the world and getting a reputation. Theater was always my first love, but my parents never really thought I could make a living in it. My parents sacrificed a lot for my sisters and I to go to college. Ultimately, I think because I love to teach, I knew that I was going to get some type of job doing that.

What was it like to do the TV show, "Treme?"

Doing "Treme" was a challenge because I had to be on the set, sometimes starting at 5 a.m., then work late that night. But they worked with my schedule at school.

What is your style of music? My style is a combination of old New Orleans traditional jazz, then I take you into the R&B, adding in some spiritual and gospel and Mardi Gras. Who else can do that musically? Our people; and it's what we bring – it's the root of this country's soul.

So wherever I go, I spread the word. The greats that have come out of here, who everybody else copied ... the Mick Jagers and the British groups.

You are one of the few female grand marshals.

The grand marshal leads the brass band that follows the jazz funeral. I have had the honor – and I say it's an honor – to be grand marshal for Danny Barker and Blue Lu Barker, Teddy Riley, Ernie K-Doe and John Brunious. I was part of their going home by being the grand marshal.

I'm one of the first female grand marshals – there are a few before me. Ellyna Tatum was a grand marshal. She was quite a character and worked the French Quarter.

[Ed. note: Rouzan was honored as a grand marshal on the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage

Festival poster in 1999.]

While we all know you as a vocalist and performer, tell me about your favorite dramatic theater roles.

My favorite role is [the title role in] Medea – I loved doing that. I've been Kate in The Taming of the Shrew. So over the years I like to play those types of characters – the very, very dramatic.

What's next for Wanda Rouzan?

I'm retiring from Audubon Charter School in May, but still have a lot of loose ends. I'm going to my daughter's graduation from Pepperdine in May, and it will be the first time I'll miss performing at Tulane's commencement, as it's the same day. My grandnephew is graduating from Harvard University. He sings in one of the school's a cappella groups.

I'm going to Brazil to perform this summer. One of my goals post-retirement is to return going out on the road, bringing my style of New Orleans music. I've performed all over Europe and South America, but haven't been to Africa. And I haven't seen much of this country, which I'd like to do.

Are you going to write a book about New Orleans and your life?

I need to write my book. I've started it.

True confession:

I love to fish; and when I retire from teaching, cooking school, here I come.

At a Glance

Age: 65

Profession: Singer, actor, teacher (of theater arts at Audubon Charter School. She is retiring next month.)

Born/raised: New Orleans (Grew up in the 7th Ward) Resides: Gentilly Family: Three sisters; one daughter and grandson

Education: Xavier Prep; Xavier University; and Pennsylvania State University

Favorite book: Books by Danielle Steel or Barbara Freethy

Favorite movie: Gone with the Wind or Ben Hur

Favorite TV shows: “Nashville” and “Smash”

Favorite food: Stewed hen

Favorite restaurant: Dooky Chase’s or Mandina’s

Favorite music: New Orleans

Favorite musician: Too hard; Wynton, Allen, Leroy, Alicia ...

Hobby: Reading and poker

Favorite vacation spot: Florida

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