

band, asked Fountain to join his national television show, which was produced in California. Fountain accepted, and his performances on the popular show generated hundreds of fan letters each week. Fountain headlined with Welk's band, and was featured in advertisements for its national concert tours, one of which took the group to Carnegie Hall, a thrill for Fountain. Exposure from the Welk show made Fountain a household name, and he soon became a frequent performer on television specials. Despite his success in California, however, Fountain and his family were continually homesick for New Orleans.

In 1959, at the height of his television popularity, Fountain returned to his hometown. Before leaving, though, he had signed a lucrative contract with Coral Records; his first two albums, Pete Fountain's New Orleans and The Blues, were particularly big sellers. Fountain enjoyed his newly acquired autonomy and soon formed a band in New Orleans; his name had made him one of the city's biggest attractions. In 1960 he established his own jazz club, "The French Quarter Inn," which became one of the hottest spots in New Orleans. Nine years later Fountain opened "Pete's Place" at 231 Bourbon Street, and later relocated to a posh 500-seat room in the New Orleans Hilton. Today, Fountain and his band still play at the Hilton; he has truly become one of New Orleans's local legends.

The title of Fountain's 1972 autobiography, in which he recalls his life and career, is taken from one of his trademark songs, "Just a Closer Walk With Thee." New Orleans remains home to Fountain and he continues his love affair with jazz and the clarinet. Musically, he adheres to the older-style jazz that made him famous: "My solos change--from reed to reed," he told Down Beat's Mandel. "They change personality from what I eat, from my day. I try to keep the improvisation alive, and not get stale that way, or into a rut. But the licks in the background stay the same." Content with his life in the city that has been his inspiration, and with his stature in American music, Fountain nonetheless spoke with some nostalgia of his younger days: "I've had my good times; I feel good now, and don't want to burn myself out. I only drink wine now; I used to like bourbon, then vodka, then it got time to cool it. But I'm still enjoyin'. I enjoy everything I have. But if I had that youth again--whew!"

PETE FOUNTAIN'S NEW ORLEANS



Born Peter Dewey Fountain, Jr. (family surname originally LaFontaine), July 3, 1930, in New Orleans, LA

For the past four decades, Pete Fountain has been among the more recognizable jazz artists in the United States, and one of the most commercially successful, with nearly 50 albums to his credit. The energetic and affable New Orleans clarinetist first rose to prominence in the 1950s as a featured performer on The Lawrence Welk Show, and in the following decades became well known through frequent appearances on television. In a 1985 *Down Beat* profile, Howard Mandel described Fountain's lively performances on *The Tonight Show*: "There's Pete Fountain, the smooth-skulled clarinetist, blowing fiercely amidst select musicians from Doc Severinsen's *Tonight Show* band. I watched once recently as he concentrated all the air in his thick body through his tight embouchure, squealing and piping quite oblivious to anything else."

Fountain's career and sound are invariably connected to his musical hometown, New Orleans. Gunther Schuller, in *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930-1945*, called him representative of "true New Orleans-style clarinet-playing." Many consider Fountain the personification, together with trumpeter Al Hirt, of the city's famed jazz venue, Bourbon Street. In the foreword to Fountain's autobiography, *A Closer Walk: The Pete Fountain Story*, Bob Harrington depicted how Fountain echoes the gusto of early New Orleans jazz pioneers, with musical roots in the "heartfelt expression" of gospel songs: "Pete is a prime example of this great musical legacy, handed down carefully and lovingly from the stellar performers of yesterday to our own generation. In his music you can hear the notes and the tones that have permeated Bourbon Street for more than 75 years."

As a young boy, Fountain listened to jazz at the Top Hat Dance Club, an establishment in his neighborhood that featured prominent New Orleans jazz musicians. Another early influence was his father, who could play a number of instruments by ear and first introduced Fountain to improvisation. Sickly as a child, Fountain received his first clarinet when a physician recommended playing it to improve his lung strength. He took formal lessons, but preferred studying the

recordings of his idols, Benny Goodman and Irving Fazola, while trying to imitate their sound and style. "It was tough putting the whole thing together," Fountain remembered in his autobiography. "I wanted to play jazz, and I was ready to swing even if my fingers weren't."

Growing up in New Orleans, however, the jazz enthusiast progressed quickly as a musician. He played in his high-school jazz band, and became an avid follower of jazz recordings and radio programs. In his free time, Fountain frequented Bourbon Street music clubs, where he would sneak in back doors to catch performances. "It was from these nights, when I hid behind bandstands or trash containers, that I began to feel the soul and the heartbeat of jazz," Fountain revealed in *A Closer Walk*. "Things were starting to fall into place for me." At 16 he formed his first band, the Basin Street Four, and was afforded the opportunity to play sets at the Parisian Room, a famous jazz spot in New Orleans. Occasionally Fountain's band members would be allowed to sit in with the headlining bands. "Playing shoulder to shoulder with the jazz giants of the city taught us this timing, and it also taught us a tremendous amount of stage presence," Fountain related. Eventually those sessions were broadcast nationally on a radio program, "The Dixieland Jamboree," and by the time he was a high-school senior, Fountain was earning union scale as a musician--\$125 a week.

Fountain continued to work with a number of New Orleans bands and artists, and soon began appearing on recordings. In 1950 he co-founded the Basin Street Six, a Dixieland comic band that landed a television contract with a local station. But Bebop, not Dixieland, was becoming the rage at this time and the Basin Street Six found it difficult booking work. They eventually disbanded and Fountain headed to Memphis and Chicago with a new group, the Three Coins. The move from New Orleans--and his family--however, took its toll. The clarinetist recounted in his autobiography that he began drinking heavily at this time, and contemplated giving up music altogether. He returned to New Orleans in the mid-1950s, not sure whether he would resume his music career.

Fountain's plans changed dramatically in 1956; bandleader Lawrence Welk, impressed with recordings of Fountain that he'd heard and wanting to "jazz up" his



Pete Fountain's New Orleans

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Pete Fountain's New Orleans

- 1 While We Danced At The Mardi Gras 2:15
- 2 A Closer Walk 2:07
- 3 When The Saints Come Marching In March 2:20
- 4 When It's Sleepy Time Down South 2:42
- 5 Ol' Man River 2:12
- 6 Cotton Fields (The Cotton Song) 2:22
- 7 Sweethearts On Parade 2:36
- 8 Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans 2:55
- 9 Basin Street Blues 2:05
- 10 Lazy River 2:36
- 11 'Way Down Yonder In New Orleans 2:20
- 12 Tin Roof Blues 3:40

Clarinet, Soloist - Pete Fountain Bass - Morty Corb
Drums - Jack Sperling Piano - Stan Wrightsman
Released by Coral Records 1959



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