

A new note



Terence Blanchard wails out a heartfelt Katrina requiem BY MICHAEL GILTZ

A Grammy-winning, coolly elegant jazz trumpeter, New Orleans native Terence Blanchard has never made an album more heartfelt and moving than “A Tale of God’s Will: A Requiem for Katrina” (Blue Note).

“It’s hard for me to feel it’s a breakthrough process because it was almost a semi-comatose project,” says Blanchard, who began the project by scoring director Spike Lee’s acclaimed documentary “When the Levees Broke” in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. “I was still trying to get my mom settled and make sure she was okay.”

That project led to his current album, which includes pieces written for that film, and more pieces by Blanchard, as well as tunes composed by his long-time band-members such as bassist Derrick Hodge, who will perform with Blanchard at Symphony Space on Jan. 3. It’s part of an ongoing series called “Blue Note Records Live,” where musicians chat on-stage with label head Bruce Lundvall.

“In a certain sense — and I’ve never been this type of person — but in a cer-

tain sense you start to feel a bit of an obligation to perform it,” says the 45-year-old father of two who has composed more than 40 film scores as well as numerous jazz albums.

“We’ve been playing it around the country and it’s made a lot of people reflect on New Orleans. It’s kept the story alive in terms of keeping people aware of what’s not going on here and some of the positive things that are going on. But mostly it’s allowed all the local people who are strewn about the country to come hear this music and mourn.”

Blanchard didn’t have much time to do that himself when first composing some of this music. Since 1991’s “Jungle Fever,” he’s enjoyed a prolific and satisfying collaboration with Lee akin to some of the great Hollywood pairings, like Bernard Herrmann with Alfred Hitchcock or John

Williams with Steven Spielberg.

But writing music for the four-hour HBO documentary that detailed Katrina’s devastating impact on New Orleans was daunting both literally (the project expanded from two hours to four hours) and emotionally (one key scene shows Blanchard and his mother entering her flood-ravaged home for the first time).

“Emotionally, it was hard to deal with,” says Blanchard, who begins the new album with the musicians chanting “This is the tale of God’s will” a la John Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme” and ends with the poignant track “Dear Mom.”

“I didn’t want to look at it. I just didn’t. The rough part about it was you couldn’t take a break. If I took a break, I’d step out the door and I was in the reality of what I was working on.”

But today Blanchard is hopeful. While talking on the phone, he’s on his front steps in New Orleans, waving to people who walk by, like the woman he sometimes boxes with. “She hits hard, ex-

tremely hard,” laughs Blanchard. And without downplaying the hard work that needs to be done or the many mistakes of the past and present, he does look for the positive effects that might come out of Katrina.

“The local musicians who are here are really helping to preserve the hopes and aspirations of the people who live here,” says Blanchard. “When I go to some of these local clubs with local musicians playing, they’re playing music that is so energetic, so up, so helpful, it allows all of us to cope.”

“In the aftermath, you’re starting to see people coming together and you’re starting to see people doing things for their community they would never have done before, and it is making a difference in how we relate with one another. But it’s still a slow process.” ♦

(Blue Note Records Live: Terence Blanchard, Symphony Space Concert/Talk, Thursday, Jan. 3 at 7:30 p.m.)

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