

Preservation Hall Jazz Band in Town

by Rich Regent

The seven-piece Preservation Hall Jazz Band from New Orleans was in Milwaukee to play music on February 1, 2 and 3, with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra accompaniment. This Band is known worldwide and may be seen on Public Television.

I have a seventh-row center seat for the last performance. After their music program, the Band musicians toss bead necklaces, Mardi Gras style, into the audience. I kindly motion to trumpeter **John Brunious**, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band's leader and the senior member of the New Orleans ensemble, to toss some beads to me. He picks out a colorful necklace and throws it. The beads glimmer as they spin in the spotlights, spiraling toward me. It is caught by someone else. A second toss is caught by people in front of me. At this point I should have jumped up on the cushion or arms of my seat to get some height. John and I glance at each other one more moment. I feel that he knows I play the same music on my clarinet. Is this a personal connection? Oh, how could he know? We both concentrate on the beads. Another careful toss comes my way. It is in the air forever, sparkling, turning in a smooth loop and so slowly descending as it flies directly toward my hands. Again, it is caught by the same people in front of me. I regret that John and I did not complete a bead toss. I have no beads to show and no story to tell.

Then I discover some sad news just nine days after that last performance. John Brunious died February 12, from an apparent heart attack in Orlando, Florida, where he had been living since Hurricane Katrina. He was 67.

I heard John play his trumpet and sing, and saw him toss beads to me. Some folks caught the beads, but I hold the memories of his authentic jazz.