

Louisiana Makes Me Smile'

THE NANCY TABB MARCANTEL STORY

Her talent as a singer is highly acclaimed. Her love for Louisiana is well documented. Her compassion toward helpless animals is legendary.

By Andrea Alexander

SHE'S TRULY ONE OF A KIND, THIS WORLD-CLASS singer and renowned animal rescuer who lives in rural south Louisiana and entertains in swanky venues from New York to Paris.

Blessed with a sweet voice, natural charm and a studied theatrical presence, Nancy Tabb Marcantel has wooed countless audiences in Louisiana and abroad. Her heart-shaped face and big green eyes are familiar to many as she has entertained in concert halls, on television and at numerous Louisiana festivals for the past few decades.

Today, she's enjoying a resurgence in her singing career that started in 2000 with the release of a compilation album titled "Louisiana Makes Me Smile." She spends lots of time traveling around Louisiana and Missouri performing in various venues.

Frequently, following her performances, people come up to her, commend her on her talent and ask:

"Why not move to Nashville?"

"Why not live in Los Angeles or New York?"

Her answer is always the same:

"Because I choose to live in Louisiana. I love Louisiana! And besides, if I go three weeks without gumbo I get withdrawal symptoms."

It's hard to find an artist of Nancy's caliber and varied repertoire. She's recorded gospel, Cajun country, children's lullabies, bilingual songs and Christmas favorites. She's acted in, and directed, musical theater. She's crooned commercial jingles, graced the Lawrence Welk Orchestra, opened for Conway Twitty and Jerry Lee Lewis, dressed up NFL football games with her rendition of the National Anthem, and sang at Mardi Gras festivals in Branson, Missouri.

(Continued)

Photography by Danny Izzo,
Nouveau Photeau, Lafayette, La.





Singer Nancy Tabb Marcantel, founder of Animal Rescue Foundation-Louisiana (ARFLA), poses with some of her friends.



All four of the Marcantel siblings contributed to the early success of the band “Lagniappe.” The photo, made in 1975, shows Peter (with guitar), who sang, played the guitar and wrote songs; Greg (top, right), who booked the shows; David, who wrote lyrics and translated them into French; and Nancy, the lead singer.



The original version of the band “Lagniappe” included (from bottom to top) Nancy Tabb Marcantel, lead singer; Benny Graeff, bass guitar; Danny Soileau, drums; and Peter Marcantel, guitar, vocals and songwriter. The photo was taken in 1977.

At her home near Breaux Bridge, a fire dances in the living room fireplace. It’s a small room crowded with love – comfortable sofas, an occupied dog crate, and five small yipping dogs. Nancy glides as easily here as she does among a crowd of fans, looking like a red-haired goddess.

She is a Cajun country ambassador – a role that Nancy proudly accepted in a trip to France for the International Festival and Trade Show some years ago. With every performance outside of Louisiana, with every CD and record of her Cajun French songs, Nancy represents her Acadian culture and heritage with class and dignity.

She started singing about the same time she started talking, or so her mother Martha used to say. Encouraged by a mother who played the piano, sang and adored Broadway music, Nancy became an accomplished musician early in life. Requisite piano lessons were followed by high school musicals. As a church soloist and choir member, Nancy learned the art of voice projection and breath control by singing in Catholic cathedrals.

Then, in 1974, she recorded the song that brought her fame and launched Lagniappe, a Cajun band featuring her

and her three brothers. The song was titled “Ma Louisiane.” Her older brother, David, whose passion is preserving the French language in Louisiana, wrote the song’s lyrics and set them to the music of John Denver’s “Country Roads.” The song was featured on a record-breaking album, which at the time became the best-selling album of



Nancy Tabb Marcantel poses with Lawrence Welk after she appeared on his show in 1976.

Cajun French music.

For 10 years, Lagniappe performed across Louisiana and other Southern states. The band tapped in to the talents of all the Marcantel siblings. David wrote and translated lyrics into French, Gregory made management decisions (booking shows and the like) and Peter played guitar and composed songs.

Lagniappe’s years of family collaboration gave rise to a family motto, Nancy says with a laugh: “If it was worth doing, it was worth overdoing.”

When she laughs, her eyes flash like sequins and her dimples curl inward like parentheses.

Nancy is a nurturer at heart. It comes as naturally as singing.

Her husband, Al Rougeau, is a sonar engineer. Like Nancy’s brothers, David and Gregory, Al has helped produce some of Nancy’s recordings; so has her father, Judge Bernard Marcantel.

Nancy, Al and his daughter Shannon make a cozy threesome. A dozen family dogs form quite a snug pack themselves in an outdoor dog yard. Inside the house, a Border Collie named Angel fits the household pet profile: an orphan saved and adopted by the Animal Rescue Foundation of Louisiana (ARFLA), a non-profit group founded

Photography is
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mixed with
a touch of magic



**Nouveau
Photo**

Danny Izzo, Photographer

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Nancy Tabb Marcantel, 1980



Nancy Tabb Marcantel, 2002

by Nancy and her best friend, Cynthia Stagg.

Angel was rescued after being abandoned in a church parking lot. The rest of the motley crew of Nancy's dogs have their own stories. Zip, a Chihuahua, survived an abusive household. Mommie Dog, a.k.a. No. 51 at a puppy mill, is a rescued terrier. Freeway is a fat beagle; Tyler, a longhaired dachshund; and Tzuie is just a glory hog who squeals and grunts his way to affection.

Nancy's love affair with dogs reaches back to the age of three. A neighborhood dog nipped her on the cheek, and her understanding at the time was that the dog "just tasted me." Now she's saving about 150 dogs and cats every year from high-kill shelters in Lafayette, Jennings and St. Martinville. Thanks to a couple of private grants, and the publicity of animal rescue efforts after Hurricane Katrina, ARFLA now advertises pets all over the country.

Nancy and her 30 volunteers take in sick, abandoned and stray dogs, nurse them back to health, and place them in good homes. As the demand for ARFLA's services has increased, Nancy has converted an old horse barn near her home into 15 kennels, appropriately named "The ARFanage."

To learn more about
Nancy Tabb Marcantel's music,
or to order it, go to
www.nancytabbmarcantel.com



To adopt a pet or to learn more
about Animal Rescue Foundation
– Louisiana (ARFLA) programs,
call (337) 332-4756
or go to www.arfla.org. 

A special cause of ARFLA is saving Labradors from "death row." It's a crucial cause because of the overpopulation of Labradors in the Deep South. True to a mother's instinct, Nancy makes sure that potential foster or adoptive homes are carefully screened. ARFLA now partners with Labs4Rescue, a Connecticut-based agency that's helped Nancy place more than 100 Labs.

In 2006, she posted an internet ad for a yellow Lab named Breaux with Labs4Rescue. The dog caught the eye of Mindy Levine, wife of the New York Yankees' president, Randy Levine. In the process of getting to know Nancy and adopting the dog, Mrs. Levine discovered Nancy's singing talent. She invited Nancy to sing at Feinstein's, a high-class cabaret at New York City's Regency Hotel. Nancy readily accepted the invitation.

Attending the \$250-a-ticket, sell-out performance were some of New York's movers and shakers: Michael Feinstein, Randy and Mindy Levine, Yogi and Carmen Berra. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg proclaimed September 25 (the day of the concert) "Labs4Rescue and Animal Rescue Foundation of Louisiana Day in New York."

The two most well-received songs of the evening surprised Nancy and her New York instrumental ensemble. The biggest hit was a clever tune that Peter Marcantel had composed about Breaux, the yellow Lab, titled "It's All Because of a Yellow Dog." The second most-lauded song of the evening was "The Birth of the Blues," a piece that Nancy had always wanted to sing, but never had. The evening was perfected with "When the Saints Go Marching In."

"It was so gratifying that people were interested in my music, and my

Louisiana Makes Me Smile

By Peter Marcantel; translation by David Marcantel

I've been down the golden highway, up the silver coast
I've been to California for a while
I've seen the Smoky Mountains and I've traveled more than most,
But I guess it's Louisiana makes me smile.

(Chorus)

I guess it's Louisiana makes me smile
When I'm with the Cajun people I go wild
Can't replace them, so embrace them
And be thankful for their style
I guess it's Louisiana makes me smile

When I feel the warm embrace of that Louisiana sun
And remember good times here before I roamed
All the places I have been to, all the things that I have done
Could never match this place that I call home

(Chorus)

J'ai quitté ma Louisiane, j'ai fait tous mes adieux
Je croyez pas que j'allais revenir
Mais de toutes les places j'ai visitées, c'est elle que j'aime le mieux
C'est pour ça que la Louisiane me fait sourire

(Chorus)

Louisiana in my Head

By Peter Marcantel; translation by David Marcantel

Louisiana born and bred, Louisiana in my head
I guess there's something to be said 'bout the way I feel
I'll never try to leave my home; I know I'd never leave alone
The bond here that has grown is much too real

(Chorus)

From the tall oak trees that stand along your rivers
To the hurricanes that lash about your coast
And the spirit of the ages haunts your people
And some would even get to know the ghost
There are those who even get to know the ghost.

Stood along a lonely bayou, watched the sun reflect the fresh dew
Knew that I could never leave you; this place is my world
Louisiana in my head; Spanish moss will be my bed
I've been starved and I've been fed but never alone

(Chorus)

Rock me in your arms, Louisiana
Sing my life in all your Cajun tunes
My father and his fathers – we've all been loved by you
Our lives reflect the strength we draw from you

(Chorus)

organization,” Nancy says gratefully.

* * *

Back in Breaux Bridge, life goes on. Nancy's kennel worker, Christy Rasmus, has brought in a mama dog with a broken leg; she saw the dog being thrown from a moving van, and picked it up. Now that the little canine refugee is here, Nancy intervenes.

She squats down on her heels – wearing black knee-length boots, black velvet trousers and a sky-blue sweater trimmed in white – to pat the bandaged dog. Swanky earrings swing down nearly to her shoulders.

To many people around Breaux

Bridge, Nancy is known as “the dog lady who sings.” Her work as a court reporter is just a footnote in comparison. But the most important thing she does may be known only in passing. It's simply this: embracing people of all walks of life, starting with her nuclear and extended families.

Since 1985, Nancy has been a member of the board of directors of A Pregnancy Center and Clinic in Lafayette. Along with other concerned citizens, she helped to found the pro-life organization. The clinic offers many services to women involved in crisis pregnancies.

“It's a cause I believe in, in part because of women I've known who've

had abortions,” Nancy explains. “I just wanted to help other women in that situation, who think they have nowhere else to turn. We offer a full range of services, so women don't have to feel like they're alone.”

Women can receive free short-term housing, counseling, pregnancy testing, ultrasounds, referrals, maternity clothes and educational services. Physicians on staff offer *pro bono* services for a client's initial visit.

“We try to save babies and women,” Nancy says. “We keep track of babies saved. Even if women do abort, we offer post-abortion counseling to them and their families, because we've

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Nancy Tabb Marcantel sings the National Anthem in the Louisiana Superdome prior to a New Orleans Saints football game in 1978.

found that most women who abort need counseling.”

As passionate as she is about her music, her activism and her humanitarian work, Nancy also spends considerable time as a teacher. With college degrees in communication sciences and in dramatic arts, she is fully equipped to teach her private voice students not only the techniques of fine singing, but also the art of performing onstage.

The renewed surge in her musical

career allows Nancy to keep her own audience-interaction skills in top form. She accepts invitations to sing at private functions, like weddings, parties, receptions and banquets.

“I teach my students that every song is a 3-minute play, so you’d better entertain me, you’d better have skill,” she emphasizes.

For 15 years, Nancy has been teaching them just that. Two of her cherished pupils remind her of where she started

singing – in church. Both students are women who wanted to sing for their church choirs. Nancy helped a 65-year-old student (a musical novice) learn to sing for her audition. She coached another student who had “no ear for music.” The heart’s desire of this particular woman was to sing for a church choir that was bound for a missionary trip out West. Not surprisingly, Nancy’s efforts met with success as she drew out both of her students’ hidden talents. ■

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