



Quarter Notes

by Shelly Gallichio

shellyg@dakotacom.net

Portraying Musicians: The Art of Music, The Music of Art

The New Orleans Jazz Museum's new exhibition: *New Orleans Music Observed: The Art of Noel Rockmore and Emilie Rhys* had its grand opening on January 30, 2020, and will be on display through September 1st. The late Noel Rockmore and his daughter Emilie Rhys have used their unique vision not only to paint musicians but also to reveal their unique personalities and their ways of approaching and making music. The exhibit will explore music in New Orleans as seen through the artistic eye of Mr. Rockmore in the 1960s and 1970s and Ms. Rhys in the past decade. This exhibit pairs them together for the first time at the Museum which has an extensive collection of early jazz artifacts throughout the building.

"The relationship of music and visual arts has long been one of mutual exchange and influence, and will be celebrated in our exhibition of Emilie Rhys and Noel Rockmore's work" said New Orleans jazz Museum Director, Greg Lambousy. "Emilie has been a longtime friend of the museum and can often be found sketching the many live musicians who perform here."

Noel Rockmore was born in 1928 to artists Floyd Davis and Gladys Rockmore Davis and began studying art and music at age nine. By the time he was a young man, his work was in group exhibitions at various New York museums including the Metropolitan, Whitney, and Museum of Modern Art. He moved to New Orleans in 1959 and immersed himself in the French Quarter lifestyle, actively painting street performers, writers, artists, musicians, and other assorted characters in the mix.

His most famous work came from commissions from art dealer Larry Borenstein whose gallery on St. Peter became Preservation Hall. He was asked to paint the traditional jazz musicians (Billie and DeDe Pierce, Kid Valentine, Louis Nelson, etc.) who played at the gallery and later at the Hall. The iconic portrait of Andy Anderson that is hanging behind the bassist at the Hall is one of his most photographed works as attendees digitally capture the band in concert. In

the late 1960s through 1977, he split his time between New Orleans and New York. From 1977 to his death in 1995, he lived solely in New Orleans.

Emilie Rhys was born in New York City in 1956. Her parents divorced when she was only 20 months old and she did not see her father again for 20 years. She received no formal art training and there was no artistic influence from either her father or her grandparents as her mother kept none of his artwork or photos. She grew up in Portland, Oregon and San Francisco and drew pictures from the time she could hold a crayon. As noted in her website, by the age of 14 she had developed a strongly individualistic style evidenced in her first small sustained series of works utilizing Rapidograph pens and a pointillist technique to produce drawings of imaginary mystical characters.

She rejoined her father in 1977 and lived with him on Orleans Avenue for a period of only 10 months. She became a successful fence artist in Jackson Square doing pastel portraits and would have stayed in New Orleans had her father been less combative. That same year she also created a mural in the historic Skyscraper building at St. Peter and Royal Streets. She moved on and lived in many places after that. In 1988 she and her future husband, John Heller, visited Santa Fe, New Mexico, and moved there in 1994, relocating to New Orleans in 2012.

Emilie taught herself by studying the masters whom she admired and through trial and error, she built a solid base of technical skills. The story of her artistic body of work in New Orleans begins on October 24, 2011, when she arrived back in town 16 years after her father's funeral. She immediately went over to Preservation Hall and did something she had never done before: she started drawing the musicians that were performing that night.

The fact that her father's canvases grace the walls of this performance space today makes it particularly special for Emilie to draw there with the spirits of her father and the old musicians looking down on her as new generations of musicians perform the music while she creates new artworks of them in action.

All drawings are created from life as the music is being performed in the venues or in her studio, and it is a point of pride that she does not utilize photography in creating these images unless some aspect of a commission requires it, i.e., depicting historical subjects. Consequently, Emilie spends a lot of time in music venues, inspired by the brilliance of the music makers to consign their image—and the environment in which they work—to art.

In 2016, Emilie opened Scene By Rhys Fine Art located on Toulouse Street in the building formerly known as The Court of Two Lions. Her work



Portrait of vocalist Quiana Lynell - oil on canvas by Emilie Rhys.

is featured in numerous collections in the United States and locations around the world. This third generation artist, whose art career spans over 40 years, has been prolifically producing original artworks of musicians during live performances around New Orleans. While pen and ink on paper is her preferred live action medium, she also creates oil portraits, some of which will be at the Museum display.

One can almost hear the music being played in her drawings: Ellis Marsalis tickling those ivories, Tim Laughlin contemplating a glissando on the clarinet, or Quiana Lynell belting out that song.

We have met Emilie several times throughout our visits and had the opportunity to ask her a few questions.

SG: How do you decide the subjects?

ER: When I set out to draw musicians I already know, I often encounter musicians I've not heard before, thus does the circle of subjects ever widen!

SG: Are you more interested in single/double subjects vs entire bands on stage which would seem to be hard to capture?

ER: During my early years here in New Orleans, I focused often on drawing entire bands on stage. It seemed a particular challenge to capture this and still is. As I got to know many individual musicians, I have been inspired to create portraits just of them and by now the majority of my work concentrates on individuals.

SG: Are you personally very interested in the traditional genre or do you enjoy the other ones as well?

ER: As you know, here in New Orleans we hear many forms of the traditional genre and I love them all. For instance what I regularly hear at Palm Court or Preservation Hall is not the same material exactly as what Tuba Skinny or Tom Saunders & His Tomcats play. As for other musical genres, I have an equal interest/love of

be-bop and free-form jazz music, in New Orleans funk, in blues. And many musicians create music that crosses genres here, making for a rich musical brew.

Emilie doesn't have a "favorite" instrument, she loves them all and at one time did study classical piano. She estimates she has featured hundreds of musicians over the past nine years and often is creating images of those today that she drew years earlier. The musicians benefit not only from the visual homage in the artwork but also from the direct sales commissions Ms. Rhys personally delivers to them.

Be sure to visit the Jazz Museum on Esplanade during your next trip to the French Quarter and enjoy the displays of various instruments that were played by the subjects of the portraits and often featured in the paintings themselves. The Museum "promises to illuminate new insights into the work of these great artists, the venerated musicians who are their subjects, and even the mysterious nature of New Orleans music and New Orleans itself." In coordination with the Jazz Museum, Emilie is producing a book-length catalog of the exhibit to be released this summer.

Scene By Rhys Fine Art is open Thursday through Monday 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and definitely worth a visit. There are hundreds of pieces and dozens of sketchbooks all lovingly produced and created by an extremely talented artist, devoted fan and extraordinary woman.

Shelly Gallichio is a retired Real Estate Associate Broker living in Tucson, Arizona. Originally from Chicago, she fell in love with the clarinet and the New Orleans sound at the age of three. She plans to make many, many more visits to NOLA seeking that wonderful sound!

SEPT. 2021 UPDATE: The exhibition is up til Nov. 7, 2021; the catalog book is in print; and Scene By Rhys Fine Art has moved cross-Quarter, now at 1036 Royal Street. **TST**



Oil on canvas of Andy Anderson (as displayed in Preservation Hall) - by Noel Rockmore, 1963.