



Emilie Rhys, photo by Sophie Germer

New Orleans Music Observed: The Musical Art Of Emilie Rhys And Noel Rockmore Featured In New Book

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Emilie Rhys' new book, *New Orleans Music Observed: The Art of Noel Rockmore and Emilie Rhys*, beautifully expands the New Orleans Jazz Museum's recent exhibit of Rhys' and her late father's portraits of New Orleans musicians.



Emilie Rhys, photo by Sophie Germer

Rhys is the daughter of famed artist **Noel Rockmore**, a visual artist originally born in New York, who became renowned in New Orleans for his portraits of musicians, especially portraits of Preservation Hall players commissioned by Larry Borenstein, the original owner of the music venue. A prodigious painter, in just over two years Rockmore painted 300 oil portraits and more than 500 small acrylics of the **Preservation Hall's** jazz musicians, which included George Lewis, Louis Nelson, Punch Miller, Kid Thomas Valentine, **Danny Barker**, Narvin Kimball, and the Humphrey brothers, to name just a few.

Rhys is an outstanding artist in her own right. Celebrated for her pen-and-ink drawings of musicians

produced live in New Orleans music venues—many of which have appeared in the pages of *OffBeat* over the years—Rhys is also a painter and portraitist whose career spans more than 40 years. She also worked as a portrait painter in Jackson Square. In 2011, Rhys moved to the French Quarter and immersed herself in the music scene, and in 2016 she opened her own gallery on Toulouse Street, Scene by Rhys Fine Art.

In addition to the recently-closed exhibit's art and instruments, the lavishly produced 282-page volume features a biography of the artists by John Ed Bradley; musician interviews by Gwen Thompkins; Myles Robichaux's essay about collecting Rhys' and Rockmore's art; and Rhys' drawings and notes for every piece of art in the book.

New Orleans Music Observed, the exhibit, opened at the Jazz Museum in January 2020. Six weeks later, the coronavirus pandemic quarantine closed the museum and local music venues where Rhys regularly sketched performing musicians.



Drawing of Little Freddie King by Emilie Rhys, photo courtesy of the artist



Drawing of Meschiya Lake by Emilie Rhys, photo courtesy of the artist



Drawing of Jesse McBride by Emilie Rhys, photo courtesy of the artist

The Jazz Museum extended the Rockmore-Rhys exhibit multiple times through the pandemic, but the show's viewership inevitably was affected by two years of music festival cancelations. Although *New Orleans Music Observed*, the book, can't replace the immediacy of being in a museum gallery, it nonetheless is an immersive experience with Rhys' and her father's art. Self-published by Rhys, the book contains 368 illustrations, 302 of them in color.

On a quiet weekday afternoon at her gallery on Royal Street, Rhys talked about the book that preserves the exhibit many music lovers were unable to see.

"I'm thankful that I could do this book," she said. "If it weren't for the book, a lot of people would have no clue about the exhibition. And because of the pandemic, I paid more attention to replicating the show through photos of the exhibit rooms themselves."

During the two-year period she worked on the book, Rhys made the most of the pandemic's

activity-restricting protocols. “With everything shut down, I could devote myself to it,” she said.

Rhys began assembling the book in the fall of 2019, before she’d completed the musician portraits that would appear in the *New Orleans Music Observed* exhibit.

“Working on this project, I felt like a stage director,” she recalled. “I saw the whole of it at all times. But the presentation of all the material—that was an improvisation over time. That’s why I think that, without the pandemic, I wouldn’t have had that immersion without interruption to the extent I did.”

Rhys stopped work on the book following the death of husband, John Heller, in September 2020. After two months of mourning, she again immersed herself in the project.

Rhys and Heller moved to New Orleans permanently from Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 2015. A New York City native, she had lived in New Orleans for 10 months in 1977, the year after her reunion with Rockmore, the artist father who left his wife and three children when Rhys, the youngest, was 18 months old.

In 2011, Rhys made her first visit to New Orleans since her 1998 trip to the city for the opening of a posthumous Rockmore retrospective at the New Orleans Museum of Art. During that visit, she instinctively went to Preservation Hall, the traditional jazz venue where her father found his musician subjects in the 1960s. That night, as Rockmore’s paintings loomed above his daughter from the Preservation Hall walls, Rhys felt as though she were in her father’s house.

“When I came back to New Orleans in 2011, it was with the vow that nothing would get in the way of making art,” she said.

New Orleans Music Observed: The Art of Noel Rockmore *and Emilie Rhys is available for \$39.95 in New Orleans at **Scene by Rhys Fine Art**, **Louisiana Music Factory**, **Octavia Books**, **Arcadian Books & Prints**, & **Prints**, **Faulkner House Books**, **Garden District Book Shop**, **The Rink**, **Silver Lotus Art & Jewelry** and **Silver Lotus Records**.*

• EMILIE RHYS

• NEW ORLEANS JAZZ MUSEUM

• NOEL ROCKMORE

• PRESERVATION HALL