

Sweet Music

The Dr. Tommy Comeaux Fund closes in on its million-dollar goal • by Todd Mouton

EXTRAORDINARY. THAT WORD FIT the late physician and musician Tommy Comeaux and it surely applies to the phenomenal fundraising effort launched after his untimely death in 1997.

A wide-ranging band of acquaintances gathered at the Acadiana Arts Council soon after Comeaux's funeral to discuss

ways they could pay tribute to their fallen friend. Since then, that now-close-knit group has produced more than a dozen grass-roots projects that have raised nearly \$1 million to fund a ground-breaking program for traditional music at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

"Tommy was interested in so many things," said arts administrator Gwyn Hutslar. "It's only fitting that our campaign committee includes a chef, an architect, a retailer, a photographer, a couple of writers, an engineer, a graphic designer and several musicians, doctors, business people and arts administrators."

A Lafayette High graduate, Comeaux went on to become head of pathology at Our Lady of Lourdes Regional Medical Center. Along the way, he garnered numerous awards

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in music and medicine, including five Grammy nominations for his work with Cajun music trailblazers BeauSoleil. He was killed while bicycling one morning. An oncoming vehicle crossed the roadway and struck him when its driver suffered a seizure. Six weeks later, a sold-out "Medicine Show" benefit concert, featuring six groups he'd performed with, laid the cornerstone for the Comeaux Fund.

"Unfortunately, the reach of Tommy's influence wasn't realized until after his death," noted committee member Karl Fontenot, chief engineer at KRVS FM on UL Lafayette's campus. Fontenot thought it might be a good idea to broadcast and record that first show and he's spearheaded the production of all 10 Medicine Show concerts and numerous other events to date. He's also helped produce the popular live compact disc series featuring stellar Medicine Show performances by The Traiteurs, Zachary Richard, Dirk Powell, The Bluerunners, The Garth Alper Trio, Bas Clas and many other artists.

The ultimate goal for the memorial

fund is the establishment of a pioneering endowed chair in traditional music, a position that would spearhead programs combining Comeaux's legacy of academic achievement with his love of roots musical forms. The endowed fund is now less than \$50,000 from the \$1 million goal, thanks to a patchwork of generous contributions; auction proceeds; concert ticket, commemorative CD, T-shirt and poster sales; and matching monies from the state Board of Regents Support Fund have all been part of the effort, which has been supported by dozens of local artists and thousands of community members.

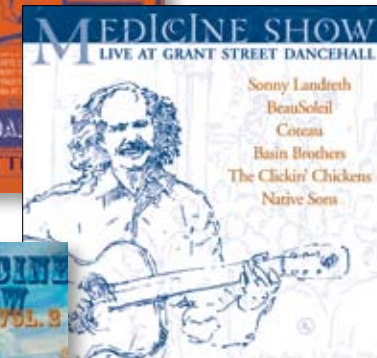
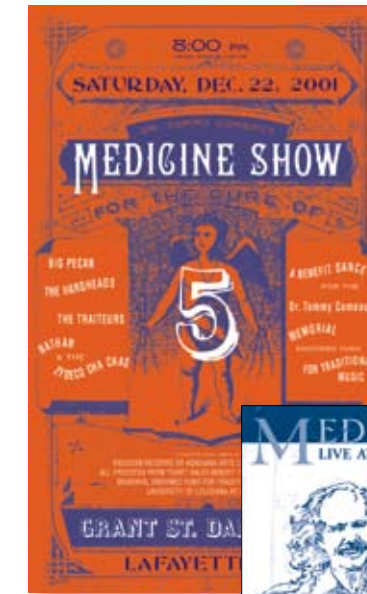
"It's been amazing and wonderful to find out just how deeply Tommy was linked into lives in all directions, to learn about people or projects we never discussed and the difference he made," said Robbie Bush, a committee member, former bandmate and president of Associated Travel Group. "That's why I've contributed to the memorial fund, a fund that when developed into a unique curriculum will touch the lives of many, from business to music and from rock to jazz, just like Tommy."

The Comeaux chair will be devoted to scholarship, instruction and the performance of traditional music of all kinds and will focus attention on the preservation and perpetuation of folk music, with special emphasis on the indigenous music of the Acadiana region. Interest generated by the endowment will be used to employ accomplished figures in traditional music and meet related programming expenses.

All these efforts are designed to recognize excellence. "Tommy was a doctor's doctor," said his father, Dr. Walter Comeaux, also a physician. "When the man who taught him pathology developed a condition that required an expert pathological opinion, he called on Tommy. I like to say he was a triple-crown winner: a physician, a musician and a humanitarian."

UL Lafayette President Dr. Ray Authement is a longtime friend of Dr. Walter and Candy Comeaux. "Tommy was just a special individual, which was not surprising because he was raised by loving parents, outstanding members of the community, who gave him guidance.

"Tommy's love for music and for people permeated just about everything he did.



Sales of commemorative Medicine Show posters and live CDs have contributed greatly to fundraising efforts.

With this endowed chair they will ensure that the music Tommy loved so much will be carried forth for future generations."

Committee member, former bandmate and musician Sonny Landreth credits Comeaux as a guiding force. "Not only was his versatility inspiring, but his passion helped to affirm my own goals," he said. "Man, if I could survive the road and keep half the spark he had for playing music, I knew I was still on course."

Landreth has performed at virtually every event benefiting the fund, and his generosity has been shared by his fan club. In recent years, Sonny's Krewe has traveled around the country selling benefit T-shirts, raising \$20,000 for the cause in the process.

"I feel that we're all just trying to do what we think Tommy would have done if he were alive today," said Gary Newman, another committee member and former bandmate, who is southern region buyer for Morton Salt

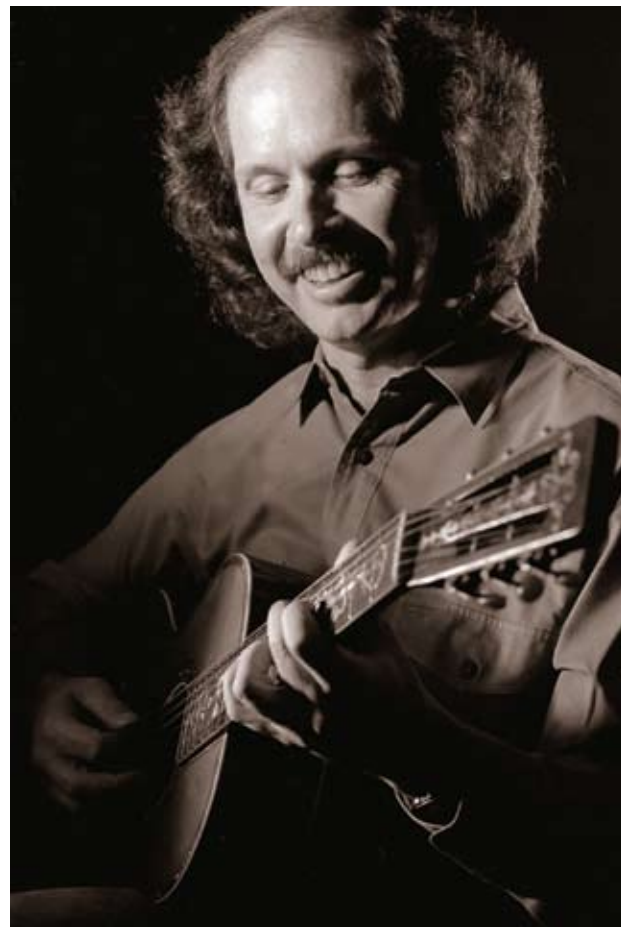
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The 10th anniversary of Comeaux's death is Nov. 8, and Medicine Show 11 is slated for Saturday, Dec. 22. The committee hopes that benefit dance and concert will be more than just a celebration of Comeaux's

life and legacy: It hopes that night will mark the achievement of an important community goal.

"Every little bit – every dollar, every event, every note – has inched us closer to the finish line, to establishing a one-of-a-kind program for traditional music," said local journalist and committee member R. Reese Fuller. ■

Todd Mouton is a campaign committee member and director of Louisiana Crossroads and Louisiana Folk Roots. Contributions to the Comeaux Fund are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law. To donate or purchase merchandise please contact the Acadiana Arts Council at (337) 233-7060 or the UL Lafayette Development Office at (337) 482-0922.



Dr. Tommy Comeaux

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