

On May 8, a young black man shot another young black man dead in New Orleans. It happens with depressing frequency; New Orleans this year has suffered 69 murders already. In this case, though, the dead man was a musician.

Brandon Franklin was 22. His father, a New Orleans police officer who left the family long ago, had recently been charged with payroll fraud. Brandon's mother didn't figure large in his life either. The person who really brought him up was a junior-high and high-school band director, Wilbert Rawlins Jr., who considers himself responsible for raising an entire city of children with "two-dollar parents." (Wilbert is one of the nine New Orleanians I profiled in *Nine Lives*.)

Brandon, whom I knew well while living in New Orleans for the book, had one of those outsized personalities that draws people to him. It wasn't just that he was handsome and commanding in the conventional sense; he had an inner light that made watching him feel like looking into some kind of alternate future. He was Wilbert's drum major -- the top-ranking non-com of a marching band -- and he could silence an unruly practice room by raising an arm. At his graduation, in cap and gown, he did back-flips across the stage to accept his diploma.

Brandon helped organize a band of young players -- the To Be Continued Brass Band -- that played every weekend at the corner of Bourbon and Canal Streets. He laboriously reassembled its far-flung members after Katrina, as shown in a well-reviewed documentary, "From the Mouthpiece On Back."

The article I have in mind, though, considers Brandon's life and death as a window on the phenomenon of high-school band in New Orleans, and its function in replacing violence with music in a population undereducated in English and other tools for resolving conflict.

The archipelago of airless, poorly painted band rooms at New Orleans's high schools are the seedbeds of the the city's sound, the places where signature musicians first hold the horn. When New Orleans high schools' football teams play each other -- sometimes in the Superdome -- the crowds pay more attention to the bands competing at halftime than to the athletes.

Jazz musicians are often portrayed as born cool -- their genius inherent and self-contained -- as though they've sprung from the forehead of Zeus wearing pork-pie hats and shades. But most of the cats wailing on saxophones and tubas in New Orleans were nurtured from elementary school by patient, underpaid, and ingenious band directors who put in long hours teaching not only musicianship but character -- manhood, womanhood, cooperation, and citizenship. Brandon's mentor, Wilbert, will get out of bed at night and drive across town to a housing project to deliver an ass-whipping to a student who has mouthed off to his grandmother. "Teaching

them to play the horn is the easy part," he says. "This is really all about teaching them to be productive citizens." I have spent a lot of time with Wilbert and his band kids. They trust me. I can get deep inside the power of high-school band and the process by which it transforms the most precarious lives into ones of legendary Big Easy richness.

To be a drum major in New Orleans is akin to being football-team captain or valedictorian in other towns. Brandon made drum major as a junior -- almost unheard of -- and held the honor when 200 musicians from New Orleans high schools played in the Rose Bowl. He interrupted a stint in college at Texas College when his girlfriend got pregnant, and Wilbert hired with him as an assistant, on the promise that he'd return to college when his son was older.

Wilbert picked Brandon up at home every morning, fed him most evenings, and was grooming him -- in bearing, leadership, and musicianship -- to achieve, post-college, one of the most exalted positions in New Orleans: certified band director. To the extent that New Orleans survives its many trials, it is because of generations of people like Wilbert and Brandon.

On Saturday, Brandon's ex-girlfriend -- the mother of his three-year-old son -- had a fight with her boyfriend, the father of her one-year-old daughter. After Ronald Simms, the boyfriend, stormed out, she called Brandon to come change the lock on her door. Brandon walked there -- he didn't own a car -- and had begun working on the door when Simms came back with a gun. People think he meant to kill the girlfriend and perhaps the children, but shot Brandon instead, fifteen times. Then he turned himself in.

Music and violence are two ways young people without much grammar, power or status can express themselves. Some reach for the trumpet, others for the nine-mil. A former thug I know in Washington, D.C., speaks of gunfire as language. ("If you hit him, good. But it doesn't really matter, because even if you don't, you've . . . said you have the power. You've made yourself heard.") Ronald Simms had a great deal to say and no effective way to say it. He was not a band kid. The ones who pick up the gun, as far as I know, never are.

Brandon will be buried on Friday in his band uniform. A jazz funeral procession will follow him from the church to the cemetery. I'd like to be there, and write for *the Oxford American* a piece about Brandon, the power of band, and the competing vernaculars of jazz and gunfire in the Crescent City. A flight costs \$300. Hotels are inexpensive. I'd need a car.