

Dec. 15, 2005--

Cyril Neville boarded Amtrak's City of New Orleans train with a full head of steam. He joined singer-songwriter Arlo Guthrie earlier this month for the first leg of a 12-day journey from Chicago to New Orleans, playing concerts along the way to raise funds for victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Neville, however, won't be on the train when it rolls into his old hometown. He won't be going home at all.

Neville, 56, percussionist-vocalist and youngest member of the Neville Brothers -- the first family of New Orleans music -- has vowed not to return to New Orleans.

During a heartfelt conversation before embarking on the train journey, Neville explained he and his wife, Gaynielle, have bought a home in Austin, Texas.

Cyril Neville joins his nephew Ivan Neville, as well as the Radiators and the Iguanas as popular New Orleans acts who have settled in Austin. Some even perform in an ad hoc band known as the Texiles.

They sing a different song about the promised recovery of New Orleans.

"Would I go back to live?" Neville asked. "There's nothing there. And the situation for musicians was a joke. People thought there was a New Orleans music scene -- there wasn't. You worked two times a year: Mardi Gras and Jazz Fest. The only musicians I knew who made a living playing music in New Orleans were Kermit Ruffins and Pete Fountain. Everyone else had to have a day job or go on tour. I have worked more in two months in Austin than I worked in two years in New Orleans.

"A lot of things about life in New Orleans were a myth."

Cyril Neville and his family lived in the Gentilly neighborhood. Their home now is uninhabitable.

"I am not a fish," he said. "I cannot live under 6 feet of water. In the 9th Ward and Gentilly they are going to do mass buyouts, bulldoze everything and make it green space. In my estimation, those are golf courses and other places where African-American people won't be welcome. There's nothing wrong with my house except that water destroyed everything we had in it. The foundation is fine. The house is still there. Same thing with our neighbors. So what are they talking bulldozing?"

"For a lot of us, the storm is still happening."

The Neville Brothers performed at September's "From the Big Apple to the Big Easy" hurricane benefit concert at Madison Square Garden in New York. Cyril Neville wore a T-shirt saying, "Ethnic Cleansing in New Orleans." Before the storm hit, 68 percent of New Orleans' 451,000 residents were black, according to wire reports. By early December, about 100,000 people had returned -- and Mayor Ray Nagin has acknowledged they are mostly white.

When the storm hit New Orleans at the end of August, the Neville Brothers were performing in New York. The family and band first regrouped in Memphis, Tenn. "Memphis was the same scene as New Orleans in that there were three clubs with 3,000 musicians trying to get gigs," Neville said. "New Orleans has Tipitina's, House of Blues and the Maple Leaf. The decision to go to Austin was a no-brainer. There was a good music scene."

None of the Nevilles is back in New Orleans. Art and Aaron are residing in Nashville temporarily (their future plans are uncertain), and Charles has lived in rural Massachusetts for 10 years.

"Up until the storm, Aaron, myself, Art and Kermit Ruffins were some of the only musicians who had 'made it' who were still living in New Orleans," Cyril Neville said. "Now you got cats that come down there every now and then to be king of a parade or whatever. They couldn't find helicopters to get people off of roofs, but they found helicopters to bring certain people in for photo ops. I'm not mad at anybody, but at the same time we put a lot into that city and never got what I think we should have got out of it."

Alligator Records recording artist and 2005 Grammy nominee Marcia Ball is a longtime staple of the Austin music scene. She was born in Orange, Texas, and reared in Louisiana. (She's also on the New Year's bill at FitzGerald's.) Neville singled her out as one of the Austin artists who embraced New Orleans musicians.

"Austin has so much to gain from Cyril," Ball said in a phone interview from New York. "He was always the social conscience, the message man. He's worked with kids and set up educational groups. He's already approached Austin High School. Austin is a different kind of town than New Orleans, which has been a dead-end street for a lot of people for a long time. You can be the best graduate in a New Orleans public high school and there's nothing for you."

"New Orleans and Austin musicians have had an affinity for each other's groove for a long time, going back to my days with the Meters when we played Armadillo World Headquarters in Austin," Neville observed. "On any given night we would end up with five or six guitar players onstage with us, be it the Winter brothers Edgar and Johnny or the Vaughan brothers."

Cyril and Gaynielle Neville now appear in a weekly Tuesday set called "New Orleans Cookin' & Jukin' " at Threadgill's in Austin. Gaynielle cooks red beans and

gumbo, and they perform with their group Tribe 13, which includes Austin vocalist Papa Mali.

"The way we have been accepted in Austin is such a pleasant surprise," Neville said. "We were treated like family."

Neville linked up with the Guthrie family about 18 months ago. He was looking for songs for an upcoming solo album and discovered the Native American rock band Blackfire. They had recorded Arlo's "Mean Things Are Happening in This World."

"That song jumped out at me, so I did my version," Neville said. "For years I have wondered how can I get in contact with Arlo and Willie Nelson -- people who have the same kind of attitude and consciousness I have and who want to use their art the same way I'm trying to use mine. I got that consciousness from Woody Guthrie."

Neville heard about this month's "Ridin' on the City of New Orleans" benefit and finally called Arlo. "Arlo asked me, and I came," he said of his participation on the tour, playing the Dec. 5 concert at Chicago's Vic Theatre and the Dec. 7 show in Kankakee. "I had obligations for the end of the tour, but I had these days free, so I came to do what I could.

"People are talking to me, but some of the people I know went through much more than I did. There are 3,000 children missing in New Orleans. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children places the figure at 1,300. Hundreds of bodies are waiting to be identified. The people of New Orleans have been scattered to the four winds. Their lives were determined by people in Washington and Baton Rouge before the storm hit.

"Without African Americans having ownership, economic equity and the same type of things the French Quarter gets -- like tax cuts -- the city will never be the same. The 6th, 7th, 8th and 9th Wards should have their own tourist commission. Build our own hotels and restaurants in those areas. The key is ownership. Then I would think about going back and living there. But we're still practicing American democracy. How can we ever bring it to somebody else?"