

CULTURE BEATS IN TREMÉ

Painting by Christina F. Pappion — Pappion Artistry • Commissioned by Friends of Tremé Culture for the 2026 Tremé Fall Festival, honoring St. Augustine Church, Congo Square, and the living legacy of Faubourg Tremé.

"This is not a painting of a parade — it is a portrait of a rhythm that never stopped. Tremé didn't just witness the birth of American music; it is the birth of it, and every color, every figure, every beat in this piece is a piece of that living history. The bamboula never left Congo Square — it just kept finding new hands to carry it forward."

— Christina Pappion

Rendered in acrylic on canvas, *Culture Beats in Tremé* was commissioned by Friends of Tremé Culture — the 501(c)(3) nonprofit behind the Tremé Fall Festival, whose mission is to preserve, celebrate, and sustain the cultural legacy of the Tremé neighborhood⁴ — as a tribute to the enduring legacy of St. Augustine Catholic Church and to serve as the official festival poster art for Faubourg Tremé, a neighborhood whose cultural output is inseparable from the history of American music itself. My objective was not decorative; it was to build a layered visual record in which architecture, procession, and portraiture work together to document a living tradition rather than simply illustrate one.

The composition is built on a triangular hierarchy that stabilizes a scene full of motion. At its apex is master percussionist Luther Gray — known throughout the city as "Baba Luther" — whose raised arm carries the eye up into the procession behind him. Gray has spent more than four decades as one of New Orleans's foremost tradition-bearers: he initiated the Congo Square Drum Circle in 1984, co-founded what is now the Congo Square Preservation Society in 1989, and founded the percussion ensemble Bamboula 2000 in 1994.¹ Placing him at the center collapses past and present into one frame — the bamboula rhythm in his hands is the same rhythm that has echoed through Congo Square since the 1740s, when Sunday gatherings among enslaved Africans became, by an 1817 city ordinance, permanently concentrated at that single site.²

Behind him, Mardi Gras Indians in full plumage, a second line umbrella, and a brass tuba lead the eye in a circular path back to the drummer, while St. Augustine Church anchors the upper register against a warm sunset palette — literal backdrop and symbolic ceiling at once. Founded in 1841 by Tremé's free people of color, St. Augustine is recognized as the oldest Black Catholic parish in the United States.³ I worked in high-chroma, saturated color with heavy, visible brushwork throughout; a muted palette would have contradicted the subject. The color functions as a formal analog to rhythm — each adjacent hue creating visual syncopation the way the bamboula beat layers against itself.⁶

This painting, then, is more than festival art. It is a compressed archive of Faubourg Tremé — its music, its architecture, its faith, and the people, like Luther Gray, who continue to carry that history forward in real time.



ABOUT THE ARTIST & STYLE

Christina F. Pappion is a New Orleans native and Louisiana Creole fine artist with 15+ years of experience, holding a BFA in Studio Art from the University of New Orleans. Her work is defined by high-chroma color, expressive, visible brushwork, and a commitment to documenting — not simply depicting — New Orleans culture, faith, and legacy. She has served as official poster artist for multiple New Orleans krewes and festivals and completed commissions for the New Orleans Saints, the Pelicans, and private collectors nationwide. She paints under Christina Pappion Fine Art and Pappion Artistry LLC.

SOURCES

1. Luther Gray biography — Freddi Williams Evans, "Revolutionary Rhythms," 64 Parishes (64parishes.org).
2. Congo Square history (1740s origins; 1817 ordinance; 1993 National Register listing) — Freddi Williams Evans, "Congo Square," 64 Parishes (64parishes.org); Congo Square Preservation Society, "Who We Are" (congosquarepreservationsociety.org).
3. St. Augustine Catholic Church (founded 1841; oldest Black Catholic parish in the U.S.) — St. Augustine Catholic Church, "History" (staugchurch.org); BlackPast.org, "St. Augustine Catholic Church, New Orleans, Louisiana (1841–)."
4. Friends of Tremé Culture mission and Tremé Fall Festival — Friends of Tremé Culture, "About Us" (tremefest.org).