



# A VISIONARY AND AN INNOVATOR:

## Eric Cager prepares for this year's Cutting Edge musical education event

*By Dean M. Shapiro, Senior Editor*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CURTIS KNAPP

**H**ere in New Orleans, a city world-renowned for its musical heritage, it is only fitting that a prestigious musical conference and talent showcase would be held here on an annual basis. That event, billed as Cutting Edge C.E., is being presented for the 32nd year, from August 21-24, and is already starting to draw attendees from all over the world.

Cutting Edge is the brainchild of Eric Cager, who co-founded it in the early 1990s, along with his partner in the venture, the late attorney Vernon Thomas. Eric still presides over it and has added to and fine-tuned it over the years. This year's conference will feature educational sessions with working musicians and other music professionals, plus other key facets of the music industry and live performances by well-known, established professional musicians.

Over the years, Cutting Edge has attracted such musical luminaries as Stax Records singer/songwriter William Bell; rapper and NoLimit Records founder Master P; former James Brown bandleader Fred Wesley; groups like Cowboy Mouth and The Revivalists and many others.

Other innovations Eric has incorporated into the event involved being on the actual "cutting edge" of technology. This included streaming the conference and its events to participants during the recent pandemic that shut down much of the musical workplaces and other businesses, as well as the conference itself.

During an interview, Eric described how Cutting Edge came into being while he was serving as New Orleans' first Director of the Music and Entertainment Commission under former mayor Sidney Barthelemy. "We had a general attitude that what we were going to do for the city and its music industry was produce an event that would help build people's musical careers and focus on education. That's what we had in mind back then and that's what we still do. It's at the core of what we do."

Over the four-day period of this year's event, Eric anticipates having somewhere between 800 and 1,000 people attending. "What we offer are the kinds of things that serve all of the elements of the music industry," he said. "So we are talking with other producers of similar events elsewhere and we concentrate our creative framework into something that people can tie into with us. We create all these different activities as a way to give people in the music business an opportunity to tie in."

Eric is especially proud of making innovations a part of Cutting Edge, such as enlisting a panel of legal experts who specialize in the multitude of categories within the music industry. This year's event will feature eight of these authorities who can advise participants what their expectations should be, monetarily, as well as what to expect from the terms and conditions of their employment as recording and performing artists.

The conference also includes one of the longest running Entertainment Law seminars in the U.S. The Louisiana State Bar Association-accredited program attracts top entertainment attorneys presenting to attorneys seeking continuing legal education credits and general attendees.

Another C.E. innovation that ranks high in popularity and attendance is the songwriting camp that emphasizes all facets of the trade, including creation, production, craftsmanship and more. "It's a very complicated environment and we break it down into its working components, Eric explained.

"Over the years, we've continued to add other events and perspectives," Eric noted. "We still maintain our core idea of working on people's musical careers and producing educational events that contain essential information.

"We also focus on hot topics and current trends," Eric added. "We look toward exploring better ways for people to begin immersing themselves in the



*Jazz promoter Toni Williams, Eric Cager and Vernon Thomas at the Cutting Edge's Roots Music Gathering oral history luncheon at Dooky Chase Restaurant.*



*"Hats on the Piano" during the Roots Music Gathering oral history luncheon at Dooky Chase*



*Eric with Black Men of Labor founder Fred Johnson during the Roots Music Gathering oral history luncheon at Dooky Chase*

entertainment profession, particularly music which is extremely complicated. It requires a sense of precedence, basically history. It requires a sense of community because you have to meet people and network. There are a multitude of facets that have to be navigated to achieve success in the music industry."

A native of Chalmette, Eric attended St. Augustine High School and went on to study as a Cultural History major at Tulane University, where his musical education began to take root. “I became active in on-campus activities under the auspices of the university’s African American organization,” he recalled. “I helped present programming and obtain funding for such events as their Black Arts Festivals. There were also events like music marathons sponsored by the Tulane radio station, WTUL in which I got involved. Eventually those marathons moved to Tipitina’s and I kept up my involvement with them.”

After graduation, Eric went to Houston where his brother lived and, for a time, he managed a nightclub. He also got involved in politics there which would serve him well on his arrival back in New Orleans.

Working with longtime former New Orleans City Councilman, Frank Friedler Jr., at his insurance and financial planning agency opened a lot of doors for Eric on the political front. “That was the gateway for me, Eric said. “That’s where I met some of the key people who helped get me to where I am now.”

Through his employer, who was one of the first White elected officials to throw his

support behind Ernest “Dutch” Morial’s first run for the mayor’s office, he not only met Morial himself but the people who would become the city’s next two mayors: Sidney Barthelemy and Morial’s son Marc.

In 1984, when the World’s Fair opened in New Orleans, Eric juggled multiple responsibilities, including overseeing the construction of several pavilions and the fair’s Food Court. Two years later he worked on Barthelemy’s successful campaign for the mayor’s office and was hired by the new mayor to supervise commercial revitalization along busy stretches of Magazine and Freret streets and South Claiborne Avenue. And then, after Barthelemy’s successful reelection, the foundation was laid for the establishment of the first city office devoted to music which Eric was chosen to create and head up.

As New Orleans’ first Music Director, it wasn’t long before his vision led to the creation of what was initially termed the Cutting Edge Music Business Conference.

During the formative years of Cutting Edge, Eric sought counsel from and worked closely with others in the music industry, including Gloria Powers with the Big Easy Awards, renowned recording studio executive Cosimo Matassa, Connie Atkinson from the former Wavelength music magazine, State Music Commissioner Bernie Cyrus and others.

He also attended the South by Southwest Music Festival in Austin, Texas where he gained insights and ideas that he would incorporate into the Cutting Edge. Over the years that followed he continued adding in other seminars and activities that have enhanced the



mission and the offerings of the annual event and he remains open to other ideas and innovations that he deems as worthy of being tried out.

Working closely with Eric for the past 27 years of the Cutting Edge event is his Conference Manager, Pamela Smith, who has held that position for the past 20 of those years. She was attorney Thomas’s legal assistant at the time and she and Eric continue to share that office space on North Claiborne Avenue across an adjacent yard from the renowned Mother in Law Lounge music venue.

This year’s festival will be honoring internationally renowned vocalist, songwriter, banjoist and guitarist, Detroit Brooks, with a Lifetime Achievement Award. Greg Lambousy, director of the New Orleans Jazz Museum, will receive the Music Influencers Award and Walt Leger, President and CEO of New Orleans & Company (formerly the New Orleans Marketing, Convention and Visitors Bureau) will be presented with a Trumpet Award for Cultural Leadership.

Breakthru Media magazine and the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Foundation will receive Community Service Awards.

*The Cutting Edge event will take place from August 21-24 at the Intercontinental Hotel in downtown New Orleans. Conference sessions include Entertainment Law, Music Business, Film financing and Tax Credits, Roots Music and the New Works Showcases. For more information and to register for Cutting Edge go to <https://www.cuttingedenola.com/>*



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