

COLE WILLIAMS:

GIVING POWER TO THE PEOPLE THROUGH MUSIC

By Dean M. Shapiro, Senior Editor



PHOTO BY ROLAND GUERIN

In January 2020, on Martin Luther King Day, Cole Williams met an influential man who would become what she called “a game-changer” in her life. As she described it, “I was singing two songs at an MLK Day celebration. After the last song, this Black man with a cane dressed in all white with white hair and a beard walked up to me and asked, ‘Why did you sing that song?’ I think it was ‘Wade in the Water’ and I told him ‘I like it. It brings people together and makes me feel good.’”

Continuing, Cole said, “He didn’t tell me who he was right away, but he started asking questions like ‘What causes are you passionate about? If you had to pick any segment of the population that’s at the bottom, who would you pick?’ I told him the homeless people, and he replied, ‘Okay, so what do think we can do for homeless people?’ I said, if it was up to me, I would use my gift, which is singing, and maybe give them a concert under the bridge since we should be uplifting people through music. Then he told me, ‘Okay, so this is how you’re going to do it, and he taught me how to organize.’”

As Cole soon learned, her new acquaintance had decades of organizing experience. He was Curtis Muhammad, a civil rights icon and one of the early leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s.

Following Muhammad’s expert guidance and mentorship, Cole gave her first “Love Under the Bridge Concert for The Houseless” beneath the I-10 elevated highway along North Claiborne Avenue. Her second concert was under the Pontchartrain Expressway overpass in 2024 with guitar accompanist Matt Hampsey. The performance was recorded by Michael Alford for Cole’s NPR Tiny Desk Submission.

During Cole’s first performance, food and sanitary supplies were given to those who came to the event. This was to be the impetus for the mission in which Cole is deeply involved today.

“Curtis was an inspiration and a role model for me; a true game-changer. I am deeply indebted to him for who I am today and what I’m doing,” Cole said, lamenting his passing in January 2022.

A multitasking singer and instrumentalist on piano and hand percussion, and a volunteer deejay on WWOZ, Cole is all over the map of New Orleans today, performing at benefit concerts and helping out the less fortunate whom she calls “houseless,” not “homeless.”

“The reason why I call them houseless



PHOTO BY MICHAEL ALFORD

is that it helps remove the stigma of homelessness,” she explained. “And I got that because one of the people told me, ‘Stop calling us homeless. We’re displaced.’”

Cole’s activist efforts have resulted in the founding of The Greater New Orleans Citizens Relief Team, placing her in the vanguard of the social justice movement for the houseless community in New Orleans. Along with others in the city, Cole

got involved in renovating abandoned houses to be given to those in greatest need and sprucing up neighborhoods to make them conducive to a more pleasant living environment.

Unfortunately, however, those activities are on hold due to the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority (NORA) demolishing the new renovations, which halted further progress. Until this situation can be remedied, Cole said they are focusing on identifying people who can work consistently with her group and those who are



PHOTO BY VINCENT SIMMONS

houseless, as well as getting food to the needy. She praised the Culture Aid NOLA food bank and Trader Joe’s for their efforts in this endeavor.

Cole also hosts a monthly podcast titled “House the Houseless: Music Into Action” with Ropeadope Records, the label of renowned trumpeter Chief Xian aTunde Adjuah, formerly known as Christian Scott.

“Every month I am able to speak about what my organization, the Greater New Orleans Citizens Relief Team, is doing,” Cole explained. “I do interviews with other

people who are working with and for the houseless. It's a way to make volunteering and organizing commonplace. It's a way to make volunteering and organizing in our work go global. We want to show how the community can help the community and highlight the people in New Orleans who are doing the work."

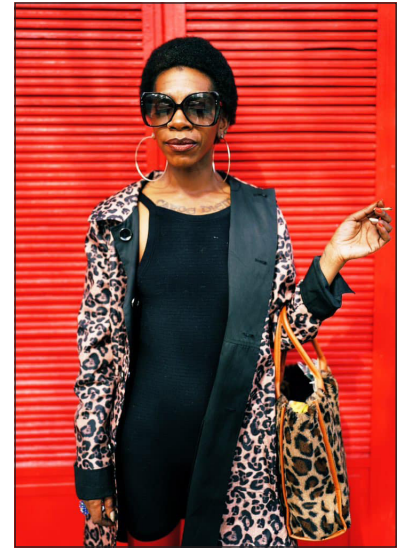
On the music scene, Cole has been making an impact with her mission as well. Her CDs, including "The Golden Road," "The Basement Sessions," "Give Power to the People," "Little Me," "Sin City, the Mixtape," "Dear Love," "Out Of The Basement, Out Of The Box" and several others contain more than just songs with lyrics: there are messages behind the words that are sung.

Her social justice-infused lyrics incorporate elements of R&B, gospel, ska, reggae, soul, world music, and other genres. Singles like "A Better Woman" and "Organize" have been selling well in the United Kingdom. She has been described by the popular online site, "Medium," as "a powerhouse of political action, motivated to help others through her music."

Other plaudits have come her way from the Huffington Post, which described her as embodying "the heart of Bob Marley, the soul of Sam Cooke and the grit of Etta James." "Grateful Web" called her "an acclaimed, genre-defying artist." "Symphonic Distribution" named her one of the "8 Black Artists Making Waves in 2024."

Cole's vocal performances have been featured on major TV shows such as "Late Night with Jimmy Fallon," "Good Morning America" and "The Jools Holland Show" on BBC in the U.K. Her performance venues include the Joshua Tree Music Festival in California, World Cafe Live, BAM Cafe Live and the legendary Blue Note Club in New York City.

Locally, Cole has performed at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, the Congo Square New World Rhythm Festival, the Freret Street Fest, and the French Quarter Festival. She has also



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been featured on "Great Day Louisiana" with host Malik Mingo.

In addition, Cole is an ASCAP-affiliated writer and publisher and a member of The Recording Academy, the parent organization for the Grammy Awards.

A native of Brooklyn, New York, with Jamaican roots, Cole grew up in a Caribbean neighborhood, surrounded by the culture of the islands that make up the West Indies. Her mother's family was from Jamaica, and during her youth, she made many visits there. She often incorporates Jamaican rhythms into her music.

In an earlier interview published in "Breakthru Media" magazine, Cole recalled, after visiting New Orleans as a tourist, "I felt a familiarity to this city that reminded me of the Caribbean and Brooklyn. As an artist, I decided to immerse myself in the birthplace of American music and learn about its history. So, I moved here in January 2015 and now that I've been here for a while, this really feels like home.

"And so my job, my path, is to uplift people. I seem to be good at it, so I'm going to stay on that path," Cole concluded.

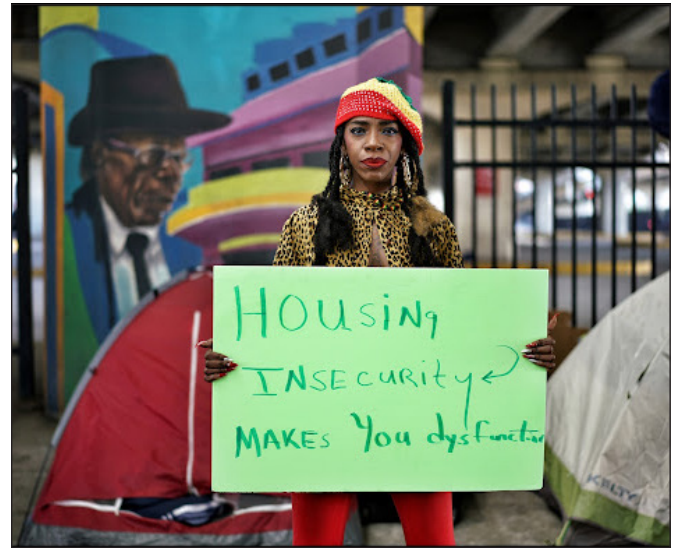


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You can hear Cole Williams with her ensemble on the first Fridays of every month at Buffa's on Esplanade Avenue. You can also follow her on Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) or YouTube at <https://rebrand.ly/cole-youtube>. You can also listen to her on "The New Orleans Music Show" every Tuesday from 11am-2pm over WWOZ radio at 90.7 FM.

To donate to The Greater New Orleans Citizens Relief Team's GoFundMe page, go to their website at <https://gnocitizensreliefteam.org> or <https://gofund.me/59f32af3>.