

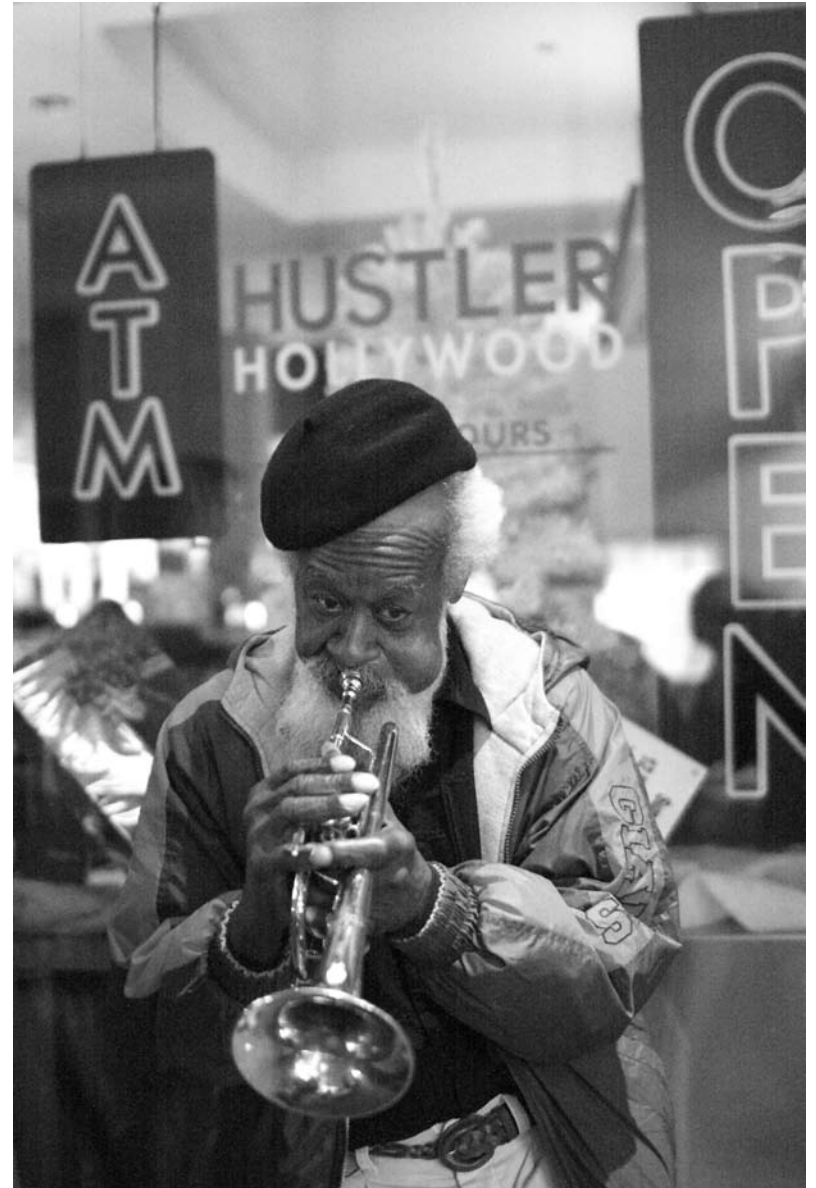
Alexander from New York City

A lot of the people I see walking around in the French Quarter they're drowning. They don't know how to swim in the world. They're out there in that raging river and they're flapping their arms. I'm gonna get my clothes wet and jump in that nasty river and I'm gonna show you my format. Just relax. Lay on your back, breathe. Hold on. See music is my backstroke. If you let that backstroke get you outta the river, get you outta that deep water, you're gonna make it to the beach. Then we're gonna sit down on the banks and have a talk. What you doing in that water over there? Lets talk about that.

Do I make sense? A lot of people say I talk crazy, they can't follow me at all. I think it's because they're too worried about details. It's like you're looking at a painting, and all you can see is one brush stroke. Your brain doesn't have enough information to make a picture. You can't see all the different colors, because you're too focused on one color, the color of the now. But the now doesn't exist. Touch my hand. See? It's in the past already. It only exists in your memory. But what is wisdom? Memory. Our thinking process is no more than the fruit of our past. I'm a blessed man because I remember everything that has ever happened to me.

I'm supposed to be developmentally retarded. Not able to walk, talk — anything. The doctor who gave me a caesarian section, he was drunk. He cut through the uterus and cut my head wide open to the brain. They said that I probably wouldn't live past morning. My momma, my grandmother and my three aunts and half sister prayed over me. Non stop prayer — twenty four seven, put their hands on me, rotated in shifts. Next morning I made it through. The doctor couldn't believe it. He said maybe a couple more weeks at best. Then my daddy's pastor said get the hell outta here. We don't need your bullshit. This is in God's hands. When he put his hand on me, my eyes looked at him and I smiled, a baby that young he's not supposed to smile, but I was smiling because I had joined in the prayer.

I started off playing music when I was three years old. My daddy bought me a little cardboard guitar. By the next morning I was playing it. Nobody showed me. It was a gift. From there I started



Sidewalk Saints

playing piano. By the time I was six I was playing the organ in church. Ten years old I could play every instrument in the orchestra — and the doctors said I wouldn't even be able to walk and talk. Man, those doctors don't know shit. I finished high school at age eleven. Age fifteen most kids are still in high school, I got a damn PhD. You hear me? A PhD.

After college I went in the service. I'm in the Vietnam War. I became a pilot, went in one of them Top Gun pilot programs. I flew missions, but it wasn't nothing. I said I'm going to get my commission to go and become Special Forces, go on the ground and see the people — mistake of the century. First man I killed, seems like it's five minutes ago. I changed, I flipped. After a while it was fun. We had a game we used to play. You reach into a man's chest and rip his heart out and see how many times it would beat. If it beat two times you won the bet. It was our competition. See I didn't see a man. I saw a challenge. That's where my head was at. The greatest feeling was to kill somebody, and because of that I became a POW. My karma was so bad.

I was a prisoner for nine years. My body weight went down from two hundred and forty nine pounds to a hundred and three. The food, they had a big old pot, you put your hand in there and scooped up your rice. That was your food for the day. One day I said I can't take it anymore. I looked up and I told the Big Guy, I know I've sinned tremendously, I've done a great amount of harm. Just let me die and send me to hell, cause this is too much. I quit. I give up. About two seconds later, a tap on my shoulder. I'm trying to figure out who the hell it is. Somebody's playing some kind of game with me now. I look down at the chain on the door, and it just disappeared. I'm like what the hell? He stepped out and he reached out his hand, and he said, "If you believe, hold my hand." I told him that I didn't have the strength. But somehow I reached out and grabbed his hand. BOOM! through my whole body and I had the strength to stand. We walked right by the guards. I said man, you're gonna get us both killed, but they just looked right through us like we weren't even there. We started walking and I saw a flash and then it was dark again, then another flash, darkness, flash, darkness. It was confusing me. Then I realized those flashes were days and nights. He and I walked one hundred and thirty nine days, dude. Never said a word. No food no water, nothing. We got to a big

field and then I looked at him and I said, "Who are you?"

He said, "You know who I am. You been calling on me."

I said, "I been calling on somebody — this character we call... Jesus..."

"You are correct. You are quite correct. Let your eyes prove what your heart can not show you."

And then he was gone. I looked up in the sky and I saw a rainbow and below it was an American Jeep. They took me back to the base and they said if you stay in we'll give you a star, make you a general. I told 'em I was gonna walk. I didn't wanna hurt nobody no more. I'm not supposed to be here. I asked for death. But He gave me a new life. I went out to the runway and got in a jet fighter and flew it all the way back to New York.

My head was totally screwed up. I couldn't mention nothing to nobody. For two years I stayed in my parents backyard, because I couldn't stand being inside. It was too much like being locked up. Only way I got myself together was my wife, Lady Samantha. We'd met back in high school. She was the love of my life. She saved me. We moved into our own place, and bit by bit I started getting back to playing my music.

Pretty soon I got a job working with a company called Motown Records. I was a writer and senior director in the studio. I commuted to work from New York to Detroit by helicopter. I was my own pilot. That was my car. You get in your car and go to work, I got in my helicopter to go to work. Life was very sweet. I had eleven cars. Each of my kids had their own Cadillac, chauffeur driven of course. My wife had a Rolls Royce. I had a stretch Rolls for the family. I had a Jaguar and a Lamborghini. I was living what you call the American Dream. It was all perfect till my wife and two of my kids got killed in a car crash.

Everything in my life lost its value. All the glitter and glamour was gone. Like you go to the store and buy a roll of toilet paper. It's good until you use it and then you flush it and it ain't worth shit. You get used to steak, lobster and caviar it's hard to adjust to baloney and hotdogs. Lady Samantha was like Beluga. All the other women are still hotdogs in a dry bun.

I couldn't stand being in that house, so I got in my car and

Sidewalk Saints

started driving down to Cancun, Mexico. Hit New Orleans and I stopped by to see Samantha's family. I fell in love with them. The kids, the aunts and uncles, I love them all. I always kept saying I'd be leaving in a week, but I could never make myself do it. After a year and a half I got my own place. I been here ever since. Her family is my home. They're the reason I ended up here. The City of New Orleans is just a lagniappe.*

When Samantha was gone, I didn't hardly play music anymore. But on her birthday two years after she passed, I dusted off my horn and took it down to the river. I sat down there and said baby, this is for you. My mind is just floating up, thinking about my wife, the times we went dancing, the funny things we used to do, like the time she buried me up to my neck in the sand at the beach. All these pictures running through my head and I look down I said, Whoa! I had money in my case. I like this. I took the money out, did it again.

Then I met a guy named Tuba Fats, he said he liked the way I blow my horn and he invited me to play at Preservation Hall. I went down there and everybody's wearing suits and ties. Tuba told me to get my horn, but I told him I can't do it. Something don't feel right. He said you play music on the streets. I said yeah, but I can't play in there. He said I like you, but man you're crazy. I said yeah. I'll see you on the streets.

You wouldn't believe the stuff I seen while playing on these streets. Matter of fact, I got a notebook that's over five hundred pages full of stuff that I seen out here — single spacing. Like for example, there's a nun in Jackson Square, and what she does is if you're down and out she got a pair of clippers to give you a haircut, tell you where to get showered and clean clothes. Tell you where to look for a job. That lady used to be a prostitute and a drug addict.

Ten years ago, she confronted me, wanted ten dollars for sex. I said why? You're drunk. She said I gotta get crack. I said, listen, I don't wanna have sex, but I'll give you twenty dollars to get your drugs, and I can go with you so somebody don't try to rob you. Then you can come home with me and take a shower and wash your clothes off. OK, so I did that with her. For two months I bought her her drugs, I supported her habit. But everyday I made her eat breakfast with me, made her eat lunch, made her eat dinner. And we ate and we talked. Talked about a

* New Orleans term for an added bonus

lot of things, but mostly I just listened. One day, on her own, she said, I don't want to have a smoke today. I just want to cook dinner for you. And she cooked me dinner, shrimp and rice. We sat down and she started crying, "Nobody don't care about me, I'm a tramp. I'm a ho."

I said, "I don't see that. I don't see what you do. I see who you are."

She said, "You really care."

"I do. What can I do to help you out? What you wanna do with your life?"

She said, "I know I'm not smart enough for school. I just want faith. I think I wanna be a nun."

I told her, "I think it's a good idea. You been on the other side of the fence. You can tell those young girls about what it's like over there and you can spot them on their way. You can make a difference woman." We went to a place two blocks down, Mary's Cathedral. I told them her story and they accepted her. They said, well we'll give her a try. That was nine years ago. She's still there now. She got thirty-nine girls off the street. That's thirty-nine souls that we're going nowhere. Now to me, I did that. Because if I didn't get to her, she wouldn't have got to them. And she can teach them to do the same thing. To me that's big. The pyramid effect gonna make me thousands!

That's faith. Make sense? Faith is a work, not a thought, not a feeling. You have a choice, you can choose to believe or you can choose to doubt. To believe is simple — no additions. Doubt got a lot of parts to it. There's nothing but guaranteed confusion, pain and loss, death and destruction. With faith there are no questions only answers. Simple isn't it? But can you do it?

Listen to this: One day I was playing my horn down by the river and I seen a little child fall in. Her asshole daddy is standing there saying, "I can't get my suit wet, because I gotta go to a meeting. Help me! Somebody save my child!" I dropped my horn, that's how it got the little ding in it, take off my shoes real quick and hit the water. Put her on my back and said, hold on. She had a death grip on my beard. Fortunately, I'm a trained Navy SEAL. If it weren't for my training I wouldn't have made it to the shore. And because of that that little girl is still alive today, because I made that choice to jump in that river.