

Interview

'For this record, I took an edible and said, screw it': jazz pianist Sullivan Fortner on confronting the trauma of Hurricane Katrina

Hugh Morris

The New Orleans native is a three-time Grammy winner at the top of his game – and is now using his instinctive style to celebrate the resilience and clarity of Katrina survivors

"Black music is forward and upward in movement, you know? Never forward or upward," pianist Sullivan Fortner declares. *"It's a tornado that's always getting bigger and moving faster,"* he adds, whizzing his fingers around with delight.

On a video call between sets at Rotterdam's North Sea jazz festival, the 39-year-old speaks like he plays, with quirkiness, subtlety and mischief. A three-time Grammy winner – including for 2025's *Southern Nights* – Fortner also recently received the Larry J Bell award, a prize of \$300,000 (£225,000) given every four years to a standout jazz pianist, which gave him the confidence to present an all-encompassing version of himself on *Leave That in There*, his sixth album. "I've tried the self-editing way," he says of previous albums involving multiple takes and endless post-production tinkering. "For this record, I took an edible and I just said, screw it."

Fortner's sweep is wide and idiosyncratic. On album opener *Sugarcane*, Kayvon Gordon's criss-crossing bātā drumming helps root the record in Louisiana's history as a centre for the sugar trade, the "white gold" extracted by slave labour that made the area one of the richest in the 19th-century US. But the record travels: through Latin acoustic piano, journeying Hammond organ lines, Thelonious Monk tributes and whirling Moog synths, it ends with Fortner singing a wordless, Stevie Wonder-like hymn to a late friend, Linda Payne.



Leave That in There is also rooted in 2005's Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans, Louisiana's biggest city, where Fortner grew up. The album takes its title from a moment in Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, the epic 2006 documentary that underlined just how much the US failed New Orleans during and after the disaster.

Lee relays events with a brutal fury. Dead bodies float face down in flooded boulevards; out of the water pokes a sign for Humanity Street. But Fortner's title derives from a more understated moment. A woman exits her car, and when she's told she's left her purse behind, she tersely replies: "Leave that in there."

Fortner evolves her words into an artistic manifesto against self-censorship. "Music to me is a kind of a place of safety, where anything can happen," he says. "Rather than saying, 'OK, these are the things that I'm going to hide,' it's more a case of, 'these are the things I want to keep with me.'"



The Guardian

Fortner was 18, and preparing for another year at Ohio's Oberlin Conservatory, when he got a phone call from a fellow New Orleanian student who told him their city was under water. Fortner shrugged – the area floods regularly – but his friend persevered and Fortner rushed to his dorm. “I turn on CNN, and the first thing I see, in a panning shot of the Convention Center, is my girlfriend and her mother waiting on buses to show up.” Phone lines and emails were down. “So I was panicking. Finally, I got a phone call from my sister, and it lasted like five seconds.” The call cut off, but she confirmed her family were safe, evacuated to nearby Baton Rouge; his girlfriend's family, meanwhile, were bussed seven hours to Arkansas.

Two tracks – A Poignant Time, and Another Poignant Time – reference a Wynton Marsalis quote from the documentary: “I think that this is a great moment in American history, because in this moment we see a lot of what's wrong with us.” Lee's film particularly emphasises the debilitating impact of Katrina's aftermath: of denied insurance claims, substandard accommodation, and sluggishness by federal disaster agency Fema. “People are still dealing with the trauma of that time, even now,” Fortner says. “Not just through people losing their homes, but their mental and physical health – still dealing with grief.”

“But it also showed the resilience of the people,” he adds. “There was still that crop of people that's just like, ‘I'm coming back. This is my city. I ain't going anywhere.’” His family – an oil rigger dad (“gone basically half the year”) and a mother who was “everything to us” – remained, a half-hour drive from the city centre. For his family, “singing is kind of our love language,” he says. There are around 40 singers among his relatives, and he's working on an album featuring all of them.

His formative musical experiences came with them in the church, but a flash of inspiration came, aged 11, through local organist Ronald Markham. “He got on the organ and started playing Bach.” Fortner had never heard anything like it. “He said, ‘man, it's classical music.’ Then he goes and plays Latin, then gives me a 30-second demonstration of all these different genres. I didn't know anything about any type of music other than gospel. But he had the key, and opened the door to this world I'm in now.”

Markham suggested he attend the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. In his year were other musicians who have also become Grammy mainstays: Chief Adjua, Trombone Shorty and Jon Batiste. Later, in New York, Batiste double-booked himself, meaning Fortner filled in on piano with legendary trumpeter Roy Hargrove.

While in Hargrove's band, Fortner began studying with another legend, pianist Fred Hersch. Fortner would turn up to lessons having practised tunes during the week. “Fred'd be like, ‘No, you prepared that, that was a drag. Just play something for me, and then we'll go from there.’” The trust in intuition that Hersch impressed on Fortner would become among his biggest strengths.

For all the power of the albums Fortner has recorded since, his most characterful work today is arguably with US singer Cécile McLorin Salvant. In rough sketches posted to social media, they sit down, hit record and play through Sting, Noël Coward or upturned Great American Songbook tunes. The performances embody a looseness that defines Fortner's work: always moving forward and upward, never hemmed in. “Just because it's permanent, doesn't mean it has to be precious,” he says. Recording, whether in a studio or on Instagram, “is just a statement in the moment: of how we feel and where we're going.”

Leave That in There is released 28 August via Artwork Records

