

## **MIKE WEATHERFORD: Entertainer escapes Katrina, returns to Vegas**

Compared to his 15 years in Las Vegas, Earl Turner hadn't worked in New Orleans very long.

Harrah's Entertainment cultivated the singer's transition from lounges to showroom headliner, moving him from the Rio to Laughlin in 2002, then to Harrah's New Orleans in May of last year.

Turner says he had turned the corner on the initial perception that he would be too slick or "Vegas" for a city with such a rootsy and indigenous musical heritage. "It wasn't long before that turned around," he says. "We really changed a lot of minds. But the people of New Orleans, that's what made it happen."

Those are the people he worries about now. Turner already has many faces to associate with Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. He was a spokesman for The Blood Center, and he and his wife Christine were on the board of directors for a new school for the autistic, a school destroyed by flood waters.

So Turner and his wife "look at each other and say we're the lucky ones." His house in the city's West Bank area is largely unscathed, and the casino was the least damaged of Harrah's three Gulf Coast properties. The company is saying it could reopen in a month, but the Turner family opted to retreat to Las Vegas and enroll its two teenagers in local schools.

Even though he lived here much longer, "being here in Las Vegas, it's very surreal," he says. "I'd rather be there doing something." Maybe he can do something from here. This Sept. 11 brings talk of another citywide benefit concert like the one Las Vegas entertainers staged two months after the 2001 terror attacks.

"I'm ready to go. I'm waiting to hear the next word on it," says Rio headliner Frank Scinta, who got the ball rolling on the first concert with Harrah's Las Vegas headliner Clint Holmes. "Everyone wants it to happen."

Myron Martin co-produced the 2001 benefit and now heads development of downtown's performing arts center. He says he's inclined to "let the important part (of the rescue work) happen first" and not rush a benefit. "We want to do this the right way."

We might see several smaller efforts in lieu of one big one. Martin says to expect a "Broadway Cares"-style night when several shows collect cash in their lobbies. Entertainer Michael Cagle and National Entertainment Group announced a Sept. 18 benefit at Sam's Town. But Harrah's could oversee something major. In 2001, Martin had to make sure the 9/11 concert came off as a "neutral" effort. This time, Harrah's owns half the Strip and is directly embroiled in the disaster. The company could stage a concert in the Rio's convention center or Caesars Colosseum.

And considering his ties to both cities, Turner might be the perfect host.

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