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April 11, 2010

# ZEST

## A bayou gets its own soundtrack

Houston waterway inspires  
Brad Sayles' suite

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# The sound of a bayou

Brad Sayles found inspiration for commissioned piece as he toured Houston's iconic waterway

**F**EW classical music commissions come with an offer of an outdoor adventure.

But when film producer Janice Van Dyke Walden asked Brad Sayles to compose music for a documentary about Buffalo Bayou, she suggested he start with a canoe trip down the Houston waterway.

So on an August afternoon, Sayles climbed into Walden's boat to explore the bayou's wilder parts.

"It was quite a surprise and, I tell you, Janice is a genius for making me do that," Sayles said.

On the trip, they encountered birds, breezes, jumping fish and canopies of cypress trees. They also found debris, cement and pollution that have battered the bayou.

When he sat in front of his piano to compose *The Buffalo Bayou*, his goal, he said, was to re-create those sights and sounds into musical notes and mold them a suite with three movements: tenderly, as a prayer; largo, mysterious; and reflective and calm.

"What I always wanted to depict

By Tara Dooley | ARTS WRITER

was the sound of the visual landscape," he said. The piece Sayles composed will make its concert premiere Saturday, performed by the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra, which will repeat the performance on Sunday. The movie remains a work in progress and details about its premier will be determined down the road.

"From the score itself, he is definitely painting pictures with music," said Alecia Lawyer, founder and executive director of the chamber orchestra.

Though Walden and the Endangered Species Media Project, a Houston-based, nonprofit education and media organization, originally commissioned the work as a score, the documentary took longer to develop than anticipated. But Sayles contin-

## THE BUFFALO BAYOU

Brad Sayles' suite will be performed by the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra.

■ **When:** 5 p.m. Saturday

■ **Where:** Church of St. John the Divine, 2450 River Oaks

■ **Tickets:** \$10-\$25

## Second performance

■ **When:** 6:30 p.m. April 18

■ **Where:** Bayou Bend Collection and Gardens, 1 Westcott

■ **Tickets:** \$20-\$25

■ **Information:** 713-665-2700 or [www.rocohouston.org](http://www.rocohouston.org)

**PURPOSE:** The Buffalo Bayou will become a score for an upcoming documentary about the waterway, but the suite will be performed for the first time at two concerts next weekend.

MELISSA PHILLIP: CHRONICLE





MELISSA PHILLIP PHOTOS | CHRONICLE

**MUSICAL JOURNEY:** Brad Sayles said *The Buffalo Bayou* score is meant to invoke the sights and sounds of the urban wilderness waterway.

ued to work on the music, which he crafted into a suite that will be the centerpiece of the film's score.

"Having the music in place helps provide a point of inspiration and in some ways determines the rhythm and pace of the project or sections of the project," said Walden, director of Van Dyke Walden & Associates, a public relations firm.

Walden has been interested in making a movie about Buffalo Bayou since she was a teenager living on the bayou's banks in the Memorial area.

"The bayou itself was one of those places that you looked at, but you didn't have much interaction with it," Walden said. "But you were affected by it."

After a career in filmmaking and public relations, Walden decided to make the movie in 2007 and teamed with the Endangered



**SPECIAL TRIP:** Brad Sayles said taking a canoe trip down Buffalo Bayou helped him find the inspiration for the score.

Species Media Project. The movie and music continued the Endangered Species Media Project's interest in raising awareness about

the bayou and the importance of preserving it, said Frank Salzhandler, the organization's director.

"It is a way of bringing

Houstonians down into the waterway," he said. "Most Houstonians, if they even think of Buffalo Bayou, it is as they drive over it."

Walden and Salzhandler were introduced to Sayles by Lawyer, an oboist who had worked with Sayles on a recording of a film score. Lawyer, who is also the chamber orchestra's principal oboist, was an advocate for making Sayles' work into suite.

As a concert piece, the suite enables the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra to participate in Walden and Salzhandler's goals to raise awareness about the bayou and urban wilderness, Lawyer said. Not that the point of the concert or the suite is to beat listeners over the head with a conservation message, she added, noting the piece stands alone without any interpretation, she said.

"You meet people where they

are," Lawyer said. "There is no reason it has to be a purposeful thing but I personally would like to start conversations."

Sayles, 35, is a senior recording engineer at KUHF, responsible for producing Houston Symphony concert broadcasts, among other duties. When not working full-time or helping his wife with two young children, Sayles sequesters himself into a sound studio in his Kingwood home.

"I pull a lot of late-nighters," he said.

Sayles' suite will be performed for the first time Thursday, when the chamber orchestra's 38 players sit down together with their scores.

For Sayles the first playing is always nerve wracking, he said.

"It really is like hearing your baby cry for the first time."

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