

# NEW ORLEANS CITY BUSINESS

## Q&A: DJ Johnson, owner, Baldwin & Co.

By: Sonya Alexander, Contributing Writer April 8, 2021 0

**Name:** DJ Johnson

**Title/Company:** Founder & owner, Baldwin & Co.

**Hometown:** New Orleans

**Education:** Georgia State University

**Previous projects:** NOLA Art Bar

Founded by New Orleans son DJ Johnson, Baldwin & Co. is a new indie bookstore and coffeehouse that opened in February. Located at the corner of Elysian Fields and St. Claude Avenue in what used to be Gene's Curbside Daquiris, the bright white Art Deco structure sits at the edge of Faubourg Marigny. After working several years in information technology in Atlanta, Johnson returned to New Orleans for a family matter and decided to stay to pursue his business ambitions.

### Did you have an interest in books growing up?

I did. My parents were avid readers so that helped. There's a number of statistical studies that show that kids that grow up in a household with books are more likely to read. My mom and dad always put a strong emphasis on reading.

### You also have the NOLA Art Bar. How did that come about?

The NOLA Art Bar is inspired by a conversation I had with an artist friend about showcasing his works as well as street artists' works in some of the nicer galleries on Julia Street in the Art District. And why we don't see what I'd consider some of the more cultural arts of New Orleans in nice galleries, but only sold by street vendors in Jackson Square and in more of a rugged environment along St. Claude.

St. Claude is becoming an art district for street artists with all the murals and pop-up art galleries there but these aren't aesthetically well-lit, polished environments. I wanted to create an environment to give street artists a chance to showcase their work in that type of location so people could see their work in a different setting.

I also wanted to create a space where they could sell their work as well. They paint a lot of work on murals. However, you can't sell a mural on a building.

The building is a private cocktail bar as well. A lot of times tourists come to New Orleans and only know about hand grenades and hurricanes. But New Orleans has a very rich private cocktail culture. Initially we started off doing live music as well.

So, the three elements of New Orleans culture I wanted to highlight was the private cocktail culture – the art of drinking, the art of cocktail creation. The visual arts with art you can put on the wall. For the gallery, we remove all furniture from the lounge and showcase it as an art gallery from 12:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. Then the live music aspect is the other element. I wanted to give local artists the opportunity to perform. Due to COVID, we've suspended our live music performances inside the Art Bar. But after COVID, we hope to resume. We opened in February of 2020.

### How much property have you purchased in this area?

Four separate lot records.

### Do you specialize in any particular kinds of books?

I specialize in information....!

### Why did you choose this area?

Because I grew up in this area. One of the things that makes a successful real estate investment is to purchase in an area you're familiar with. Some investors are successful investing outside of communities that they're familiar with. But my strategy is I like to function in an area that I am familiar with.

### What's an average workday for you at the bookstore?

A lot of administrative work. A lot of meetings. A lot of interviews. Working with my staff here at Baldwin & Co., then transitioning the managing my staff and administrative tasks at NOLA Art Bar. Baldwin & Co. opens from 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. and is open seven days a week. NOLA Art Bar is open 4:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Makes for some long days.

### What are the challenges for an indie bookstore?

COVID didn't help. It's the challenge of competing with Amazon. Amazon is the #1 seller of books in the world. They have phenomenal pricing and expedient shipping. I can't compete with that. So, you just have to find a niche of people who enjoy supporting local business. Who love to come to an environment where



DJ Johnson. Photo by Tracie Morris Schaefer

they can physically see books before they purchase them. I'm confident that local bookstores will continue to do well.

**Where do you get your coffee from?**

From a local roaster, French Truck.

**How do you rent out the podcast studio?**

It's designed to give the community a space to breathe. The exchanges and receipt we have of information beyond these glass walls is by books or texts. But some people prefer to learn by audio.

Some people do their podcasts from home using their iPhone, which is a great product. However, it doesn't have the benefits of professional podcast equipment. It doesn't give you the capabilities to record in a professional manner. If you're looking to grow your audience and gain sponsorship dollars, that professional quality will benefit you. We offer it at a very reasonable price, compared to a recording studio.

**How did you decide the aesthetic of the place?**

I like straight lines. I like brightness and natural tones. So, it was just a matter of me designing something I found aesthetically pleasing and hoping others enjoy it.

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