Bayou by the Bay

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By Mark Freeman

D R. JOHNSON SEEMED TO WALK OUT OF A SWAMP SOMEWHERE IN THE CONFUSION OF THE '60S. HE WAS THIS HOLY HOODOO APPARITION, BLACK BEARD AND BANGED WALKING STICK AND ALL. BEHIND THAT INCARNATION LURKS A REAL guy named MAC REBENNACK, and the whole natural history of New Orleans Mardi Gras. All that myth and history are right here in San Francisco, when Dr. John walks out on the stage at Slim's in his black beret trimmed in alligator and sits down at the piano to play style after style after style. He starts off with "Iko Iko," one of the two Mardi Gras Indians' anthems full of Creole patois, from the days when escaped slaves were taken in by Cherokees whose own men were grabbed for government work gangs. Then it's a Ray Charles tune, "Doing That Mess Around," with a left hand stride he credits to old recordings of Pinetop Smith, plus boogie triplets from Cow Cow Davenport and long limber discordant runs. He follows with sweet modulations on "(I Call My Sugar) Candy," sounding like Mose Allison on a gravelly path. Promising "to whisper another old moldy on your ear," he provides his own brand-laced, tensoric deliverance of "Makin' Whoopee." In his 13th Ward Novoollows egg-scent.

Next on the playlist is one by "the man who taught me all I know." It is Roy "Professor Longhair" Byrd's "Tipitina," played with seemingly endless musical resources. "Fess" — as Byrd was known to New Orleans musicians, was an unsung piano hero. Jelly Roll Morton reportedly added tender and habanera to 16-bar ragtime; Longhair put 12 or 8 bar blues to a rhumba rhythm. Dr. John started on guitar in Fess' band before he shot his string bending finger and switched to piano. Dr. John remembers first meeting Fess in Harvey, Louisiana, he'd accompanied his father (who installed jukeboxes in hotel rooms and clubs) to the Pepper Pot Pot Oven. Out back was this man, "sitting on a tree stump, smoking what they called a boomalobatch. I was a nosy kid, asking him stuff about what he was playing — double-note crossovers and unders. He just fascinated the shit out of me. After that I didn't see him for a long time, but I remembered who he was and he was telling me." Rebennack learned piano from James Booker, a brilliant R&B and jazz musician who was theCopyright 2020. All Rights Reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed. We are a non-profit organization.  Please do not redistribute any content.  Thank you for respecting our content.  This content was created to help support our mission. Please contact us at info@earmark.org with any questions.  

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Dr. John seemed to walk out of a swamp somewhere in the confusion of the '60s. He was this holy hoo doo apparition, black beard and banged walking stick and all. Behind that incarnation lurks a real Piano man named Mac Rebennack, and the whole natural history of New Orleans Mardi Gras. All that myth and history are right here in San Francisco, when Dr. John walks out on the stage at Slim's in his black beret trimmed in alligator and sits down at the piano to play style after style after style. He starts off with "Iko Iko," one of the two Mardi Gras Indians' anthems full of Creole patois, from the days when escaped slaves were taken in by Cherokees whose own men were grabbed for government work gangs. Then it's a Ray Charles tune, "Doing That Mess Around," with a left hand stride he credits to old recordings of Pinetop Smith, plus boogie triplets from Cow Cow Davenport and long limber discordant runs. He follows with sweet modulations on "(I Call My Sugar) Candy," sounding like Mose Allison on a gravelly path. Promising "to whisper another old moldy on your ear," he provides his own brand laced, tensoric deliverance of "Makin' Whoopee." In his 13th Ward Novoollows egg-scent.

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Bay Area bayou

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It was in New Orleans, "the city that care forgot," that the music first came together. On Congo Square in the slavery days, African drum rhythms encountered French, Spanish and Italian melodic traditions; creole classical and ragtime piano playing met the lowdown blues guitarwork of rural blacks. They all differed in style and technique, but they found a way to blend together. Lady Be Good, a young trombonist wearing a hat in the African national colors.

The band at the back of Sidney's Saloon plays "Lady Be Good" brass band style, featuring a young trombonist wearing a hat in the African national colors.

The band holds forth. It's made up of neighborhood old-timers and up-and-comers from Rebirth Brass Band — high school marching band players who found that by learning some jazz style they could play for tips on Bourbon Street and make a lot more than working at Popeye's Fried Chicken.

Now Rebith has begun to get famous (even doing commercials), and the week I'm in town its members have flown to Paris and Cannes for a pick-up gig. "Stackman" Sidney — the usual trombone sax player — is off touring with Fats Domino's band. Other origins of the band include "elders" Benny Jones (saxophone), Lionel Batiste (of the famous New Orleans Batistes) and Butch Gomez (playing his rare 1920s curved soprano sax).

The band plays the back of the bar around a plywood-covered pool table, in the narrow glade of its Bud Light lamp. They play "Chinatown," "Lady Be Good" brass band style, featuring a superb young trombonist named Revert "Peanut" Audry, who's wearing a leather cap in the African national colors. This leads into a frantic version of "Feel Like Funkin' It Up," that proves the vitality of the band's rhythm department.

As if to validate theories about New Orleans musical miscenagation, they break into a Latin beat for a version of Hank Williams' country-creole "Jambalaya." By this time several of the more intoxicated men in the bar are dancing, free-form and loose-limbed, in front of the pool table. When Professor Longhair's anthem "All on Mardi Gras Day" issues forth from the horns, women and couples join in, dancing in the aisles, then following the marching band out into the street to finish the set.

During the second weekend of this year's Jazz Fest, those in the background of the bar were almost dancing with the music. "We got the Michael Jackson treatment in France — this was something they'd never heard before," says 25-year-old trombonist Keith "Wolf" Anderson ("They say I make the horn howl," he explains). The band follows "I'm Gonna Work 'Em Out (You Gonna Run)" a la Louis Armstrong (Kermit Ruffins on lead trumpet has been compared to Satchmo) with their own junk and anti-crack "Leave That Pipe Alone" and "Free My People," about South Africa.

Wolf is not surprised to hear that in the band's absence the rival New Orleans Brass Band has been boastin' they'd be better than Rebith. That's how we want them to feel," he says, noting that many of them are relatives or school friends. "Nowadays things have changed," he continues, remembering when he was 15 and played with the highly competitive old-time band of the Olympia Brass Band, learning by listening hard, rather than by asking questions. "If the old guys don't encourage younger guys, this thing is going to die. That's the only way we can keep the drive alive." Judging by the young crowd at Town Hall jamming to New Birth's music — making like Mardi Gras on the ground floor, as clerks and customers lean over the railings up above — this music is far from dead.

The band at the back of Sidney's Saloon plays "Lady Be Good" brass band style, featuring a young trombonist wearing a hat in the African national colors.

Where to get New Orleans in the Bay Area

"New Orleans by the Bay" returns for its second year, Sunday, May 20, from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., at Shoreline Amphitheatre in Mountain View. Queen Ida and the Bon Temps Zydeco Band will perform, along with gospel, zydeco, ragtime and dixieland bands from around the world, and traditional Louisiana Cajun food. Reserve tickets through BASS.

Queen Ida will also play Paul Masson Vineyards in Saratoga on July 5 (with Michael Doucet and Beausoleil) and July 6 (with Zachary Richard). Dr. John returns to Slim's in S.F. with Texas blueswoman Marcia Ball on July 7, and the Dirty Dozen Brass Band on July 8.

Rebirth Brass Band's latest album, Feel Like Funkin' It Up, is now available on Rounder Records. Ellis Marsalis can be heard backing up Lady B on The New Orleans Sound of Music, and either on Rounder or Rounder Check out Down Home Music in El Cerro, Village Music in Mill Valley, and Jack's Record Cellar or Record Finder in S.F., for these albums and lots of other great New Orleans music.

100% Hoowollins Dr. John at the keys.

By the time we actually get to the jazz fest, it's almost impossible. It takes place on a racetrack in huge tents and outdoor stages surrounded by police selling good stuff to eat (barbecue alligator, pork, burgers, fresh crabs and dozens of other delicacies in the $2-$4 price range). There's also way too much music to hear, all happening at the same time.

Among the alternatives, on Friday, are Bo Didley, D.L. Menard (a set of Cajun Hank Williams & the Louisiana Aces, Bobby Marchan. Best-designed group award goes to Delfeayo Marsalis' band, featuring the incredible soprano saxophones). On Saturday night Delfeayo Marsalis and Jason Marsalis. The audience ranges in age from teenagers up to 70-year-olds, of all races, all intent on listening.

The band does "Night Train," starting with a lonesome whistle (on sax) and rim shiss (from drummer Ralph Peterson) that provide the steam-driven wheels, then horns (including Marlon Jordan on trumpet) swing us sweetly toward where we want to go, a tenor sax slips us through dimly-lit sleeping cars. Willie Metcalfe's piano winds it down slow enough to where all the rhythm and drums and guitar and singer bring it home — to New Orleans.

Saturday's lineup includes groups as diverse as Mudboy and the Neutrons, Buckweat Zydeco, the Golden Eagles Mardi Gras Indians, Ashford and Simpson, and Cassellberry-Dupree. The latter are two dreads, a woman and a girl, with gold dollars and dreads with Marita Rojas on bass and Annette Aguinal on drums and congas, who came out of women's music about a dozen years ago with their heart-pounding amalgam of soul, voice, African vocal style, saletas, reggae and gospel. Their huge audience responds wholeheartedly to their combination of liberation lyrics and roots songs.

But the day belongs, definitively, to the National Dance Company of Senegal. Alternating with quiet African "blues" licks by a master of the 36-stringed kora, the drummers lead us through tribal dances, as a dozen or so dancers move themselves in joyful, spiritual and sometimes unbelievable ways, ways that later became the Black Bottom and the jitterbug, the Funky Chicken or dance dancing. Now New Orleans has gone home.

Sunday's crowds are in full force for the big names; it's impossible to get in any tent without a backstage pass. Dr. John is playing at the same time as Harry Connick Jr. (who also studied piano under James Booker). Aaron Neville sings two lovely Sam Cooke-type numbers with The Zion Harmonizers.

But the day's biggest draw is Champion Jack Dupree, finally returned from exile in Europe to the city that orphaned him (like Satchmo, in a fellah's home) and never let him earn a living. "Here is a number I learned from '44 Kelly in 1924," he says, hammering some big, thick chords. He plays "Everything's All Right" the way he taught Ray Charles and Professor Longhair. He sings "Oh Marie (It's Now or Never) in the Italian operatic tradition of his father. His is the kind of music that makes you say "I'm glad I got there, but it's also good to be back in the Bay Area, where we can hear a lot of this music throughout the year — and demand of local club owners that they bring us the rest."