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# DR. JOHN

[ BY ASHLEY KAHN ]



IT'S A CHALLENGE to choose which Dr. John to celebrate first. He has been active since the rise of rock & roll, and many are the coats he has worn: riff master, R&B guitarist, and boogie-woogie piano professor. Psychedelic-vooodoo-rock shaman and stately New Orleans musical ambassador. Bandleader of top-tier talent and A-list sessionman/producer. Player of downhome blues and singer of uptown jazz standards. "Ain't no difference," Dr. John said of himself a few years back. "It's all one sucka in there, however you want to break it down. . . ."

He's also the inventor of his own personal brand of funkified street-parade rhythms he calls "fonk" and the creator of an individual, rhyming vocabulary that borrows liberally from the street slang of his New Orleans youth. "We don't speak French, we don't speak Spanish. We just speak music. And that's real true. When I was a kid, they used to sing a greeting, 'Where you at, m'darling. . . .' You tell me another city where people sing hello," asks Dr. John.

## HE ABSORBED NEW ORLEANS' MIX OF SOUNDS AND STYLES

The Ph.D. may be self-endowed, but—to put it as he would—ain't nobody disputin' the title. Legal documents list him as Malcolm John Rebennack Jr., and his friends call him Mac, but to a much larger circle that stretches around the globe, he's known simply, reverently as Dr. John. To fully grasp his stature today—and his historical importance—is to understand how Rebennack's entire career is an ongoing tribute to the city of his birth.

Like the Mississippi River that first gave New Orleans its crescent shape, the city harbors a free-flowing music scene awash in its own history and ever-open to outsidestreams of influence. Time is fluid there as well—past and future styles flow comfortably together. An inordinately high percentage of music makers live there; regardless of instrument, age, or professional status, each commands the kind of admiration other municipalities reserve for civic leaders and sports heroes. The city's top piano players have long been called professors. To this day, high school boys carrying a trombone or trumpet—not a football—get the girls.

Rebennack explains it this way in his autobiography, *Under a Hoodoo Moon: The*



*Life of the Night Tripper:* "In New Orleans, everything—food, music, religion, even the way people talk and act—has deep, deep roots; and, like the tangled veins of cypress roots that meander this way and that in the swamp, everything in New Orleans is interrelated, wrapped around itself in ways that aren't always obvious."

From the get-go, Rebennack was "mos' precocious," to paraphrase a Dr. John lyric. He was born in New Orleans' polyglot Third Ward in 1940, and picked up the guitar at age 7. Before reaching puberty, he had already taken lessons from Fats Domino's guitarist, played in revival meetings with a local gospel evangelist, and snuck into all-night R&B jams at French Quarter juke joints like the Brass Rail and Texas Lounge. By junior high school, he was attuned to the separate-but-absurd Jim Crow regulations that sought to divide the music scene along racial lines. He began hanging out at Cosimo Matassa's recording studio on Rampart Street, witnessing Little Richard, Ray Charles, Fats Domino, Guitar Slim, and other pioneers in action as they laid down the tracks that changed the world of music.

It was a wonderful period to be on the New Orleans music scene, and Rebennack made the most of it. Through hands-on training or simple osmosis, he took what he could from a variety of singular musical sources: bandleaders Paul Gayten and Dave Bartholomew, guitarists Roy Montrell and "Papoose" Nelson, piano masters Professor Longhair and Fats Domino. He absorbed the city's rich mix of sounds and styles: jump blues and boogie-woogie piano, Mardi Gras chants, and the zydeco music of western Louisiana. Flowing through it all was the irresistible,

syncopated tug rising up from the city's street parades—the celebrated second-line rhythms—that proved to be the foundation of the funk revolution (just ask George Clinton or Bootsy Collins).

During his teen years, Rebennack began his career in earnest. He led or co-led a variety of proto-rock & roll groups like the Spades, the Night Trains, and the Skyliners. He played with local stars like Frankie Ford, joined recording sessions, and backed up national touring artists. He wrote songs and served in an A&R capacity for regional independent labels like Ace as well as Ric and Ron. A few of his tunes—"Lights Out," recorded by Jerry Byrne in 1958 for Specialty, and his own Bo Diddley-esque instrumental, "Storm Warning," in 1959 on Rex—achieved moderate success in sales and radio play.

It was an exciting time filled with constant gigging, during which Rebennack became all too familiar with the hustles and habits—even dangers—of a rock lifestyle. He developed a fixation with narcotics that dogged him for decades. A song he failed to copyright became the huge hit "Lady Luck" for Lloyd Price in 1960. A year later, while he was trying to stop an altercation between his singer and a hotel manager, a gun discharged, seriously injuring a fretting finger. He soon made the difficult decision to shift his focus from guitar to bass, and eventually to piano and organ.

HIS VISUAL  
IMPACT  
MATCHED THE  
OTHERWORLDLY  
EFFECT OF THE  
MUSIC



In 1967, following the twin disruptions of a drug bust in Texas and the closing of many French Quarter nightclubs by New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison, Rebennack joined a musical exodus to Los Angeles with the likes of singer-songwriter Jessie Hill and producer/arranger Harold Battiste. He quickly became a mainstay on the city's busy studio scene, and Battiste put him to work recording on various Sonny and Cher dates. As the music began to shift in a harder, more rock-oriented direction over the next few years, Rebennack recorded with a wide variety of artists—from Frank Zappa and Iron Butterfly to Johnny “Guitar” Watson and the British R&B bandleader Graham Bond.

All the while, Rebennack could not stifle a mounting desire to return to the sound of his New Orleans and to play music that challenged his musicianship more than simple pop numbers could. He had long had a project in mind, one that drew from the rich, spiritual folklore of his hometown. “Known variously as John Montaigne, Bayou John, and, most often, as Dr. John, he was . . . a medicine man who claimed to have been a prince in Senegal [and] eventually settled in New Orleans,” Rebennack says, describing the birth, in 1968, of one of the most colorful characters in rock history: Dr. John Creaux, the Night Tripper.

“For many years, I had nurtured the idea of forming a musical group around the personality of Dr. John. . . . At a certain point, our little group of New Orleans exiles in L.A. managed to grab some open-studio time through our Sonny and Cher connection. [Battiste] sweet-talked a deal for us with Atlantic, though neither Ahmet Ertegun nor Jerry Wexler were aware at that time what we were cooking up . . . the tracks that turned into the *Gris-Gris* album.” What Rebennack and his crew had concocted was an unusually swampy brew of sparse rhythms, catchy melodies, and mumbled lyrics dealing in supernatural forces and vague spiritual references, all centered on an obscure, bearded figure who introduced himself on the album's opening track: “They call me



**OPPOSITE PAGE** *Axe-master, 1959; in the studio; with producer Allen Toussaint, 1973.*

**THIS PAGE** *In full regalia, Montreux Jazz Festival, 1973; in Europe in the mid-seventies.*

“THE FONK GOT  
A MIND OF ITS  
OWN.” SO SAITH  
DR. JOHN



Dr. John/Known as the Night Tripper/Got my satchel of gris-gris in my hand. . . .”

That Dr. John was a mystic and an herbalist was not lost on a growing youth audience then searching for more expansive, mind-altering experiences. “It turned out that *Gris-Gris*, without any hand-hustle on our part, fell into the hippie groove of the moment and became a kind of underground hit,” Rebennack recalls. “It became a cult phenom by being played on what were at the time called ‘free-form’ radio stations.”

It also launched a one-of-a-kind, sensuous stage act perfectly fitted to the growing rock circuit. The band members wore flowing robes, a dancer gyrated, incense burned, and Dr. John himself appeared in full regalia—face paint, feathered headdress, and a

kind of voodoo walking stick. It mattered little that few concertgoers at the time were hip to the fact that Rebennack’s get-up drew from the elaborate costumes worn by the Mardi Gras Indian tribes. The visual impact matched the otherworldly effect of the music: loose, swaying jams that invited listeners to lose themselves in the magic of the second-line beat.

“Because nobody knew anything about New Orleans, everybody thought it was just some psychedelic thing,” Rebennack told *Mojo* magazine in 1995. “But it wasn’t. We thought *Gris-Gris* was just keepin’ a little of the New Orleans scene alive; it didn’t sound that freaky to me. Man, we didn’t have a clue about hippies. We thought anyone who smoked a joint in public was outta they minds!”

It must be mentioned that in an age when music was easily distracted by gimmicky trends, Rebennack’s interest in the spiritual legacy of New Orleans was unquestioningly sincere and enduring. Dr. John was—and continues to be—the accurate personification of a deeply held belief in the social and personal benefits of a spiritual way of understanding the world.

A string of groundbreaking albums followed—*Babylon*, *Remedies*, *The Sun Moon & Herbs*. In 1972, Rebennack released *Gumbo*, a homecoming of sorts: a collection of New Orleans R&B classics recorded with many of the studio vets who had cut the original versions. Inspired by a conversation with Wexler, *Gumbo*, despite initially poor sales, remains one of Rebennack’s most-loved recordings, featuring a much clearer approach in his vocals, and in the album’s intent, as he revealed in its liner notes.

“This album could very well be called *More Gumbo, Less Gris-Gris*. There isn’t any what you might call voodoo rock or gris-gris, because my producers and I thought that the people might enjoy hearing the root music from New Orleans, which was maybe the chief ingredient in what we know today as rock & roll.”

In 1973, Rebennack entered the studio with the Meters and the production expertise of his old running partner Allen Toussaint. *In the Right Place* yielded “Right Place Wrong Time”—a Top Ten hit that benefited from a few lines written by Bob Dylan—and the radio favorite “Such a Night.” The album propelled Rebennack to the crest of his commercial success.

Eventually, as the seventies progressed, Dr. John left behind the robe and face paint for relatively straighter gear. *Desitively Bonnaroo*, again featuring the Meters, was Rebennack’s last Atlantic album; he closed out the decade with discs for United Artists (the half-live, half-studio *Hollywood Be Thy Name*) and a pair of piano-focused, jazz-flavored efforts for A&M’s Horizon label (*City Lights* and *Tango Palace*). The last two titles found Rebennack working with two musical friends with whom he would collaborate repeatedly and fruitfully in the years to come: songwriter Doc Pomus and producer Tommy LiPuma.

Rebennack entered the eighties a free agent. Worrying that he would “end up a solo piano lounge act, starring at Holiday Inns or bowling alleys for the rest of my natural life,” he recorded his first solo piano albums for the indie Clean Cuts label: the excellent and heartfelt *Dr. John Plays Mac Rebennack* and *The Brightest Smile in Town*. On the latter, he broke through another long-lingering fear, employing his gruff baritone to sing a classic from the Great American Songbook: Johnny Mercer’s “Come Rain or Come Shine.”

That tasteful track planted the seed for 1989’s *In a Sentimental Mood*, a set of jazz standards produced by LiPuma for Warner Bros., garnering Rebennack a Grammy—the first of five—for the duet “Makin’ Whoopee” with Rickie Lee Jones. It also presaged 2006’s *Mercenary*, Rebennack’s tribute to Mercer, a testament to the confidence the once shy singer now has in his voice. (“I’m just tryin’ to learn how to sing in tune,” Rebennack said as recently as 1995. “I always felt comfortable playin’, but I’m tryin’ to learn how to do this stuff professionally.”)

By the nineties, Rebennack was uniquely recognized for being equally at home in a variety of musical contexts and styles—and universally respected for remaining true to his roots. The nineties and 2000s have seen Rebennack switching between themes for jazz-focused labels like GRP and Blue Thumb, with collections of new originals (*Television*) and Tin Pan Alley standards (*Afterglow*), as well as salutes to his hometown (*NAwlinz: Dis Dat or D’Udda*) and to Duke Ellington (*Duke Elegant*). Meanwhile, Joel Dorn’s Hyena label began releasing gems from Rebennack’s personal archive of live recordings—such as *All By Himself*, a 1986 solo set from New York’s Lone Star Cafe.

While his popularity as Dr. John has risen, fallen, and revived itself over the years, Rebennack’s reputation as a first-call sideman has never flagged. In the seventies, the Rolling Stones, Carly Simon, Neil Diamond, John Lennon, Van Morrison, Rickie Lee Jones, Maria Muldaur, and the Band all called on his services. From the eighties to recent days, so have Hank Crawford, Big Joe Turner, Marianne Faithfull, B.B. King, Ringo Starr, Willy DeVille, Gregg Allman, David “Fathead” Newman, and Art Blakey (the last two with whom Rebennack formed the short-lived group Bluesiana Triangle).

Today—as has been the case for decades—Rebennack’s iconic stature puts him in august company within and outside of his New Orleans circle. He remains on the short list for filmed concerts and televised performances (*The Last Waltz* in 1976, Super Bowl XL in 2006); movie soundtracks (*Dazed and Confused* in 1993;



**OPPOSITE PAGE** *Performing at Jazz Charlotte festival, North Carolina, 1993.*

**THIS PAGE** *The Good Doctor in repose.*

*The Princess and the Frog* in 2009); tribute albums (Thelonious Monk in 1984; Doc Pomus in 1995; Fats Domino in 2007); and music festivals around the world (including Bonnaroo, which got its name from his 1974 LP, and the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, where he appears every

year). And as unique is the stage persona Rebennack invented, it came as no surprise he was the model for the Muppet Dr. Teeth.

At the age of 70, Rebennack is making the best music of his life. Yet, when a well-earned respite should be his to enjoy, his career shifted back into top gear as a result of the devastation dealt by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. He’s been a constant headliner at fundraising benefits for New Orleans. With his longstanding band the Lower 911—named for its collective ties to the city’s Lower 9th Ward—he recorded a succession of albums: the seven-song EP *Sippiana Hericane*, the Grammy-winning *The City That Care Forgot*, and his most recent, the Grammy-nominated *Tribal*. Each was filled with hope for the future but also fueled by outrage at the individuals and institutions that failed his beloved New Orleans.

“I say something about it at my shows, and it’s not nothing nice I’m saying about a lot of people,” according to Rebennack. “I’m a coonass from Louisiana, and we some grudge-holding suckas. . . . We are aggravated and disgusted that they want to put a third-world-country levee back up that was never sufficient to maintain a problem that’s been going on for fifty years.”

Rebennack can now add political activist to the long list of roles that he has played during six decades of making music—music that has always kept New Orleans front and center, and inspired generations of rock fans and musicians: “You can’t shut the fonk up,” he preached in his autobiography. “No, the fonk got a mind of its own.” So saith Mac Rebennack, who some of y’all might know as Dr. John, the Night Tripper. ❁