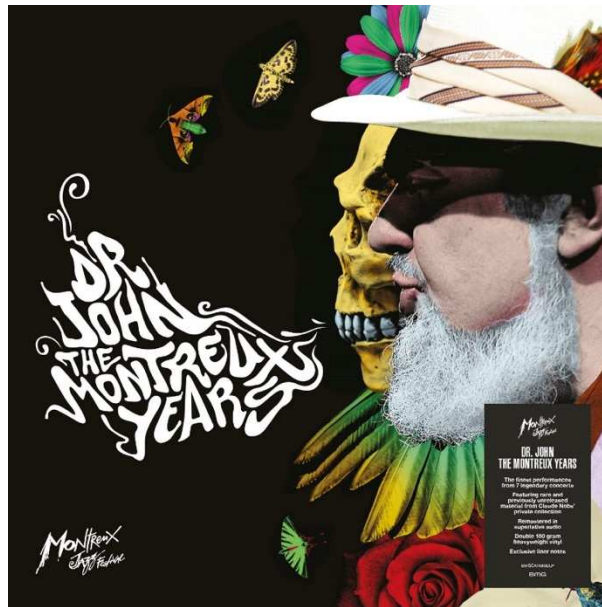


DR. JOHN: THE MONTREUX YEARS



Linernotes

A triple Grammy Award-winning record producer whose clientele has included such legends as George Harrison, Brian Wilson, Randy Newman, Eric Clapton, Steve Winwood and Rickie Lee Jones, Russ Titelman first crossed wayward paths with Mac “Dr John” Rebennack in his previous life as a session musician on the Los Angeles scene of the late 60s. Forging a deep bond and friendship, they went on to work (and play) together often over the subsequent years.

Mac was a genius – like, beyond anyone who came before him, or after him. I would go to the studio whenever he was playing and hang with him. And sometimes we’d go other places we maybe shouldn’t have been going... But he was just such a unique musician. Maybe the first time I worked with Mac, Lowell George and I wrote a song together, ‘Has She Got The Nicest Eyes’. Gary Klein cut a version for Gary Lewis & the Playboys in 1967 – I played rhythm guitar on that session, and Mac was playing piano. It could have been a real stiff pop record, and it was in an odd time signature, too – it wasn’t a straight 4/4. But Mac just came up with this piano part that was so great it made the track come alive. Mac was a great person to have on a session, because his mind was so open – he could do anything, and he had perfect taste. He was a great guitar-player too – in fact, he started out on guitar.

Mac cut his debut album, *Gris Gris*, the next year. It still feels like a new kind of music – the grooves, the percussion, the sound of the thing. And then there’s his voice, and the subject matter. His organ part on ‘Mama Roux’ is just the greatest thing in the world – round, and sweet, and groovin’ like crazy. That album is voodoo, it’s some other thing. It was like *Sgt Pepper’s* or something – there was nothing like it before, or after – the excellence of all the musicians and the conceptual element of it... I went to see him play when the record came out, at the Whisky a Go Go. That was the first time I saw the act. He came out in this cape, with all the gris-gris and shit all around, and that hat on his head, and he’s throwing glitter up in the air, and his amazing band was playing that music on that tiny little stage... It was fantastic.

Mac was a great songwriter, and he created this larger-than-life character, and that was who he was to the public. But he also had an amazing career as a session musician, and that’s because of his mastery of the music. He always brought something unique to whatever was going on. Mac had the appreciation and support of his peers – all the musicians knew that he was the guy. So you see him in *The Last Waltz* – like, they got him up there, not somebody else, and there’s a reason for that. He just loved playing music. The thing I was most proud of that I did with Mac was ‘Too Close’, a slow gospel song by Alex Bradford on Jackie DeShannon’s *Laurel Canyon* album. We cut it live, and had Barry White and two girls singing the “choir” parts. I played guitar – Mac said I was the only white boy he’d heard play guitar like Sister Rosetta Tharpe – but check out Mac’s piano part, and Jackie killin’ it on the vocals.

On Rickie Lee Jones’ first album, which I produced with Lenny Waronker, there’s a song called ‘Easy Money’. Mac came in for the session and, instead of playing piano, he played this fantastic part on the celesta. You hear it and you

just go, 'What's that?' His part is just brilliant. You didn't have to say anything to him about 'do this' or 'do that'. Lenny said Mac was a great catalyst in a room with other musicians, because his musical brain was so big. And he had no ego about it, he was above all that. This beautiful music would just come out of him. Everything he played was always the right thing. And it was so deep: the rhythmic stuff, and the melodic stuff, and the intricate interplay. His left hand was like a freight train. There's the rhythm part of it, and then the boogie woogie part, so his left hand alone sounds like two different people. And then he plays all of this glorious, free stuff with his right hand.

I didn't get to see Mac play at Montreux – that's one of the reasons I'm so grateful to hear this record – but I spent a lot of time there. The first time I came to Montreux was when I produced Christine McVie's self-titled solo album in 1983. Christine had wanted to record at George Martin's AIR Studio in Monserrat. But it was hurricane season, and there were loads of mosquitoes, so I told her, "Christine – hurricanes and mosquitoes!" Arif Mardin had just made an album with Chaka Khan at Mountain Studios in Montreux, and he said, "It's the greatest place, you'll love it there." So we decamped to Montreux, and I got to know Claude Nobs, the genius, the unbelievably wonderful human being that he was.

Talk about creating something out of nothing... Montreux was not exactly a place where people went before Claude started the Montreux Jazz Festival. It's like he had this vision... He loved jazz, and he had to make this festival happen. I went to the festival quite a few times. The hub of the life of the festival was Claude's chalet. He'd invite everyone up there, with its beautiful view and the best food – everyone who played the festival would end up at Claude's. He was an amazingly generous and supportive person, and just such a character. And thanks to him, we now have this archive of amazing performances recorded at his festival.

Listening to this album is a trip. There's the material from Mac's 1986 appearance, where he's just playing solo piano, and it's amazing. I hope we get to hear the whole show one day. The tracks from that performance are like a masterclass, like going to Nadia Boulanger to learn about music. The freedom of it, and the depth of his musical knowledge, and his ability... It's mind-boggling. He just had an innate sense of what to play. And what he plays tells the story of the song. The solo piano stuff is like a masterclass in improvisation, in taking a musical form and stretching it out into new territory. And it's only because of his incredible knowledge and his incredible ability and his big heart...

There are references to New Orleans boogie piano in his playing, but he makes it his own. It embodies Professor Longhair, Allen Toussaint – but it's out there in the stratosphere. Mac embodied New Orleans music, he was a master, beyond any master that was there. When I hung out with him, he turned me on to so much stuff. I'd meet all these musicians who were in his band, like the percussionist, Didymus, who was a really great guy, and his drummer Freddie Staehle, who was a revelation to me. I was exposed to a lot of New Orleans culture and music through him, stuff that I never heard before.

I was listening to that 1986 solo piano material and I said, 'Wait, is there a band playing with him? Or a drummer? Is there a bass player?' But it was just his fucking left hand. I thought, 'It can't be... Maybe there's another guy up there with him...' Really. The inventiveness... He does 'Sick And Tired', the old Chris Kenner song, but Mac does it and it's a whole other thing, so joyful – it just hits you in this place. He knows the music. It's in his bones, his blood, so he just plays and has fun.

Then he does 'Accentuate The Positive'. Johnny Mercer should've lived to hear Mac's version. Maybe he's up there enjoying it right now. And there's that amazing sax solo on it. A standout for me is Mac's version of his own song, 'Rain'. Mac had such a breadth of knowledge and ability, and he uses his voice in such a different way on that song. It's astonishing. There are some signature records in my life – Nina Simone's debut album, and The Genius Of Ray Charles – you can hear echoes of both of them in 'Rain'. Then there's his version of 'Making Whoopee', and then Longhair's 'Big Chief', with Trombone Shorty killing it. And then he does 'Love For Sale' – "Not exactly the way Cole Porter composed it," Mac says at the end, but it's really great.

And then he does 'Goodnight Irene', a Leadbelly song, and he completely owns it. It's like he rewrote it. Because 'Goodnight Irene' was like a lullaby, a love song, with all this emotional angst about loss and all the great stuff that's in all the great songs. And Mac takes it and turns it into this rollicking stomp. And he ends it – and this is what I thought was so great – by singing, 'I'm gonna get you girl, at the end of my dream'. The piano playing goes like relentless freight train through the open countryside – don't get in the way. The whole history of music resides in those two hands. The history and the future.

Mac had a real funny sense of humour. He was a real gentle kind of person, quiet-spoken. And he just oozed music. He was one of the most creative musicians I've ever encountered. When he played piano, it was orchestral – and, at the same time, the funkiest thing you ever heard. Listen to just what he's playing with his left hand: it struts and bounces and wraps itself around you. There's a whole band in there. He is New Orleans music.

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