

Henry Butler Press

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All The News
That Fits

Henry has been nominated a 4th straight year for the **W.C. Handy Awards Best Instrumentalist Piano**

He will performing at the 25th annual awards show on April 29th in Memphis TN.



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“He’s the pride of New Orleans and a visionist down-home cat and a hellified piano plunker to boot. — Dr. John

Bop, Boogie & Barrelhouse Blues Revue September 2000

In the class of New Orleans piano professors that includes Louis Moreau Gottschalk, Jelly Roll Morton, Fats Domino, James Booker and patron saint Professor Longhair, Crescent City native Henry Butler’s playing has earned him a tenured position. Whether he’s performing solo, in front of overflow crowds at the annual New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, or communicating intimately with die-hard locals at hometown joints the Funky Butt or Le Bon Temps Roule, his multifaceted playing dazzles like the light off a diamond. Ragtime, Caribbean motifs, traditional and modern jazz, classical and stride piano are all parts of Butler’s repertoire. But after five albums that showcased his jazzier side, Butler changed his focus with his 1998 Black Top release *Blues After Sunset*. “I’ve been playing the blues for years, and I would have done a blues record earlier had I had the producers that believed it would have been a salable item,” Butler said recently before a gig at Donna’s Bar and Grill in New Orleans. “Most producers thought I was a jazz artist, even though my album *Blues and More, Vol. 1*, is a little bit blues. But it’s sort of mellow, more in a jazz context, than *Blues After Sunset*. After *For All Seasons* [1996 modern-jazz album for Atlantic], I just decided that I was going to do a blues album regardless.”

Butler’s foray into the genre is the latest chapter in his diverse and storied career. Growing up, he studied piano at the Louisiana School for the Blind in Baton Rouge, but he switched his major to voice in high school because of the lack of Braille piano manuscripts. While receiving vocal training in opera, German lieder and European art songs, Butler also kept at the keyboard, gigging with local bands. His voracious musical appetite led him to noted Louisiana horn player and Southern University professor Alvin Batiste, one of the state’s most

respected music instructors. Butler enrolled in the Baton Rouge college, fully embraced Batiste’s tutelage and rededicated himself to the piano. Butler’s prowess blossomed rapidly and earned him a National Endowment for the Arts grant to study piano with George Duke, who’d just replaced Joe Zawinul (of Weather Report fame) in legendary jazz saxophonist Cannonball Adderly’s band. While that experience helped Butler establish contacts in the modern jazz world, Batiste’s veritable history lessons on the myriad cultural threads in music, from African and Nigerian rhythms to Cuban percussion, also informed his playing and helped Butler connect the dots between seemingly disparate traditions. “Part of my foundation is definitely rhythmic,” Butler said. “It certainly didn’t hurt to study the music of other cultures, and I’m happy to bring that to the blues. The Caribbean [sound] didn’t just get started out of nowhere. We were fortunate to be able to understand some of the African rhythms, and [the music instructors] were not only able to expose us to that, but to intellectualize it and make it an academic experience. There’s a lot of common ground in all styles of music. When I listen to Professor Longhair — and he’s got the mambo rhythms in his left hand — you can also hear some of [the African rhythms]. Mambo comes out of the Caribbean chain. And you can hear some of that in [Cuban pianist] Chucho Valdes’ playing.”

Butler’s exposure to the diverse components of Professor Longhair’s playing wasn’t limited to academic study. He was fortunate enough to cross paths with Longhair before his death, and Longhair gave Butler suggestions on technique during one-on-one sessions at Longhair’s house. “R&B might be a slight evolution from the blues itself, in that the ‘R’ in rhythm might be a little more syncopated and complex. But you still have the blues form in most New Orleans music, and in many of Pro-

essor Longhair’s pieces,” said Butler. Audible evidence of Butler’s assertions are stamped throughout *Blues After Sunset*. “On ‘Tee Na Na,’ the Smiley Lewis piece that some people say Tuts Washington wrote,” Butler said, “it’s actually a shuffle kind of a piece, a slow, lilting piece. But it works very well using the Professor Longhair concept. To me, that again confirms how you can change any style, any rhythms that you want to make it, as long as the harmony and melody fit it. I can take a tune like ‘Baby, Let Me Hold Your Hand,’ and make a shuffle out of it, and it will still work.”

Butler recently proved that theory again on *Vii-dü Menz* — his recent album of duets with acoustic blues guitarist Corey Harris — which is an even deeper exploration of the pianist’s blues prowess. On “Let ‘em Roll,” Butler digs into the barrelhouse tradition, evoking legends like Memphis Slim and nodding to the acclaimed ‘20s piano/guitar duo Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell. But he’s also putting his own spin on those classic sounds, as evidenced by his humorous original “There’s No Substitute for Love,” a keyboard-fueled homage to some of the girls he’s loved before. The album is a clear sign that Butler’s love affair with the blues — and with the piano — should yield high artistic dividends for years to come.

“Blues piano takes on a different and maybe a more unique texture and character than any other instrument,” he said. “First of all, you’ve got all these keys to play around with. The reason why I love piano is because it allows me to play blues the way I want to play it. I can change the rhythm, change the harmony and melody and all the different components in a nanosecond, and still keep continuity. I listened a lot to guitar masters like Robert Johnson, Mississippi John Hurt...

Rolling Stone ON THE EDGE

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Corey Harris sings the old natch’l country blues with a pilgrim’s zeal and 78-rpm purity. HENRY BUTLER plays New Orleans rum-house piano with a rolling thunder that sounds like he’s channeling Professor Longhair and McCoy Tyner in each hand. Together, on *vii-dü menz* (Alligator, CD), Harris and Butler make fresh guitar-piano

medicine in the ancient tag-team tradition of Scrapper Blackwell and Leroy Carr. “Let ‘em Roll” and “Down Home Livin’” are hot packages of saucy joy — Harris’ guitar slithering through Butler’s ivories like a bayou snake; the pair’s robust call-and-response vocals.

There is also the probing soul of “Mulberry Row” (named after the slave

cabins on Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello estate) and the suite of funky hymns, including the chilling original, “What Man Have Done,” that closes the album. Harris and Butler are both killin’ solo acts, but *vii-dü menz* marks the birth of a dream team.