



Quad City Times- Editorial Page Guest Column: Henry Butler 10/14/03

My love of music has spanned across most of my life. I was born in New Orleans and started playing a neighbor's piano when I was six years old. My neighbor said I had "good ears," but I later learned I had perfect pitch when I started taking formal lessons at the Louisiana State School for the Blind. During high school, I played in a couple of R&B, blues and funk bands where I learned to arrange and orchestrate. Soon I started playing in nightclubs -- and earning quite a bit of money. Through those club gigs, I realized how much I thoroughly enjoyed being a musician.

During my years of college at Southern University in Baton Rouge, I began teaching voice and piano lessons to students. After graduation, I maintained my teaching practice while completing a master's degree at Michigan State University. But it wasn't until I returned home and was teaching at the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts that I had an epiphany -- part of my mission in this life had to be sharing my knowledge with others.

I've taught music workshops throughout the country and initiated a number of different educational initiatives, including a residential jazz camp at Missouri State School for the Blind and a program for blind and visually impaired students at the University of New Orleans.

Over the past decade, I've initiated several workshops and residencies on blues, jazz and other forms of folk music. It's a joy to see people respond so enthusiastically while they become more aware of American culture and their roots.

I'm honored to be in the Quad Cities celebrating the Year of the Blues and mostly speaking about some of the personalities who have shaped the musical genre's history for more than 100 years. I'm hoping to spark more interest not only in contemporary blues, but also for the older artists who were responsible for giving birth to urban blues including Big Mama Thornton, Bessie Smith, John Jackson and John Lee Hooker.

I'll also be talking about my mentors and my personal contributions to the New Or-

leans piano style. One mentor, Professor Longhair, was a unique New Orleans pianist because he started the whole style of more percussive playing. Tuts Washington, Huey "Piano" Smith and Esquiretta were his contemporaries, but none exhibited that percussive sound on the rhythm. What I've done follows those lines of taking rhythmic structure to a different level of melodic proficiency.

Performing jazz and blues allows me to express important things which are often nonverbal and I often use my entire body as my instrument. I also respond to each individual audience's "vibe" -- whether teaching or playing music, my listeners students have as much impact on me as I hope I have on them. Through teaching I truly get to see -- if only symbolically -- how peoples' eyes can open when something I've said reaches them and the light goes on.

Thank you for allowing me to share my sounds. Let's get busy.

The Boston Globe His Louisiana brand of blues

March 3, 2000

by Paul Robicheau

Henry Butler plays the piano with a robust vigor, a stylistic breadth befitting his Louisiana roots, and a sense of control reflective of his classical training.

"It's something that you gain from a result of practice and real mental visualization, if I can use that term," says Butler, whose "Mardi Gras Party" with Geno Delafosse and Balfa Toujours at the Roxy Sunday marks his first Boston show in several years.

"For a long time, I've worked on exercises away from the piano," says Butler, 51, on the phone from his New Orleans home. The musician has been blind since infancy. "It's like basketball players do when they're trying to visualize throwing the ball into the hoop. The better players, both in music and in sports, can visualize the place where they want to be, whatever they're trying to accomplish, without being in front of the instrument or having the ball in their hands."

There's no question Butler is seen as one of those better players. Praised, in his hometown by authorities from Dr. John to OffBeat magazine (which voted him best New Orleans pianist in 1998), Butler draws from the rich Crescent City R&B stride of Professor Longhair and James Booker. He leads a funk band in addition to playing solo and has arranged spirituals for string quartet. He's made jazz albums, yet is now focusing on blues, with 1998's *Blues After Sunset* (featuring peer Snooks Eaglin) and an upcoming CD with guitarist Corey Harris.

"All these genres are relative," Butler says. "It's blues as I choose to present it and I think that's kinda the way it is with any artist. John Lee Hooker or even Muddy Waters presented a blues style that was more complex than, say, a country-blues artist before 1900. Maybe that guy would not have even recognized the urban blues as blues. What I'm

doing as blues is maybe a little different from some people, but it's still got enough roots in it that I call it blues."

"I haven't pursued as many jazz gigs lately, but I still get calls for that," adds the pianist, who can balance his virtuoso playing with soulful vocals. "If it's a total blues gig, I do a lot of blues, so I guess I modify. But I don't do anything that's not in my heritage or my upbringing. Everything that I do, I don't try to go outside myself. But, in saying that I can also say that my picture's been broad for a long time."

Butler even plans to sit in Sunday with both Cajun combo Balfa Toujours and zydeco modernist Delafosse, after performing an opening solo set.

"I'll hold my own," he says. "It's actually a nice balance between what I do and what Balfa and Geno [do]. And then, of course, when we all play together, it brings some continuity" to the styles.

Butler has kept a busy musical agenda since his youth at the Louisiana School for the Blind, where he sang in the Glee Club. When it came to choosing a major in college, Butler chose voice, not piano.

"If you're working with a very complex score, like a Beethoven sonata, it's going to be lengthy and laid out in Braille in a book format," he explains. "You're going to wind up having to memorize the from the very beginning, 'cause you need two hands to play the piano, and in Braille, you have to read with one

hand and play with the other." Making piano his minor was a clear solution for Butler, who had already been playing professionally from the age of 14. "I had to find a different route so I could move faster," he says. "There are blind students who major in piano or organ in college, but

they're mostly doing that stuff by ear, and I didn't necessarily want to depend on that, though I knew I could do it. I majored in voice 'cause I could sight read my vocal lines and do my choir stuff. I could still make money on the piano, and still learn and grow as a pianist."

He first studied at Southern University in Baton Rouge, then earned a master's degree in classical voice at Michigan State University. But it was a Southern that he found his, mentor in jazz clarinetist Alvin Batiste, who broadened Butler's musical view, from the improviser's legacy of Charlie Parker and John Coltrane to diverse world musics, and back to New Orleans icon Professor Longhair, with whom the young pianist took lessons.

Batiste "was the guy who made the contact with Professor Longhair for me," he says. "After working with me in analyzing and transcribing Panamanian and Brazilian music and [Coltrane pianist] McCoy Tyner's music, I was very surprised when he turned me on to Professor Longhair.

With Longhair, who died in 1980, Butler says, "He basically said, 'This is how I do this, this is how I do that. Try it.' So he'd do a little boogie or shuffle or stuff like that. And when he realized I was pounding the piano, his statement in essence was something like 'Don't play the piano so hard. If you play it a little lighter, you can move faster.' I've been working on that ever since."

Butler went on to live and work in California, Illinois, and New York before he returned to New Orleans in 1996. "I can do anything that I want to do here and not have to worry about some critic trying to more narrowly focus my musical expressions," he says. "As a matter of fact, the more diversified I am, the more applause I get, 'cause people expect it here."