

From Student to Professor Big City Rhythm and Blues April-May 2003

Henry Butler's musical feeling and inspiration began in early childhood while living in the central city area of New Orleans, a part of town steeped in music, especially the blues, and where the Dew Drop Inn gave birth to R&B in the late 40's and 50's and where Butler remembers hearing the music, both live and recorded, emanating from the houses of neighbors. Accompanying its mother to church on a regular basis, gospel would also figure prominently in Henry Butler's early musical experiences, but it would be later at the Louisiana State School for the Blind on the campus of Southern University in Baton Rouge, and where Butler would receive formal instruction on piano that his musical vision would come into focus.

While still in high school he began playing professionally around Baton Rouge and would also receive voice instruction, before entering Southern University where he studied classical piano and voice with musician and educator Alvin Batiste. Following Southern U., Butler went to Michigan State University where he completed his master's degree and on his journey from student to professor. Along the way Butler studied with such renowned jazz musicians as Roland Hanna, George Duke and Cannonball Adderley, would record for MCA/Impulse, Windham Hill and Atlantic, and New Orleans Blacktop and Basin Street Records labels, while also traversing the musical boundaries of classical, jazz, blues and funk.

Butler is an explorer, always open to opportunities to move, meet new people, consider new ways, to learn, to teach what he's learned along the way and serving as a vital member of a variety of communities, while never forgetting his New Orleans roots. While in college he studied classical European musical traditions, exploring styles such as the German lieder and incorporating Schubert, whose chromatic style he cites as an influence, to also exploring the unique piano stylings of hometown New Orleans' piano professors James Booker and Professor Longhair, both of whom were also influenced by and exhibited classical piano stylings.

During and after graduate school at Michigan State, Butler spent time in New York City and during the 1980's, lived, worked and performed in Los Angeles, working as a music consultant utilizing his knowledge of a variety of musical styles and employing his knowledge and rich voice as a guest host on radio. While in Los Angeles Butler also had a working hand that performed around the city and served as the back-up band for a variety of New Orleans musicians, including Earl King, Johnny Adams and Ernie K-Doe they brought in, exposing the roots of New Orleans to Los Angeles area audiences.

After three years living, studying and performing in New York City, Butler accepted a position as Associate Professor of Music at Eastern Illinois University. The call of New Orleans remained strong though, and after several years in academia Henry Butler re-

turned home to New Orleans in 1996 to concentrate on composing and performing. Prior to Butler's return home he was held in high esteem and widely regarded within the jazz community and was just beginning to be known for his unique musical explorations within blues, roots and funk.

In 1998, Butler released the critically acclaimed *Blues After Sunset* on the now defunct New Orleans Black Top Records label. That release cemented his reputation in the blues and roots realm and his reputation was further enhanced by his guest appearance on two tunes on former New Orleansian Corey Harris' 1999 Alligator release, *Greens From The Garden* that led to their further collaboration in 2000 on the acclaimed Butler/Harris *Vu-do Menz* release, also on Alligator Records.

2002 saw the release of *The Game Has Just Begun* on the New Orleans label Basin Street Records, followed by Butler as a lead player on Columbia Artists Management's "Front Porch Blues" tour, also featuring Corey Harris along with Charlie Musselwhite, Elvin Bishop, Deborah Coleman, and Robben Ford and Duke Robillard replacing Bishop on several dates. Butler was in his element on this tour, enjoying the way the sets played out at these shows with an individual artist starting a set to be joined with others for some house rockin' front out music, harkening back to Butler's early childhood in central city New Orleans where he heard these first sounds of



"Henry Butler is arguably the greatest living proponent of the classic New Orleans piano tradition, playing an amalgam of boogie-woogie, jazz, blues and classical...."

CMJ

Split Personality: OffBeat magazine November 27, 2000

(excerpts from feature in February OffBeat)

Henry Butler sits at a piano with a sense of grandeur, of power, of great dignity. There is an air of formality about him that demands attention. His posture and composure is more akin to those of a concert pianist--minus the tux and tails--rather than a jazz and R&B musician. He is a cat in full concentration, with every muscle primed to pounce.

The attack is equally dramatic. When Henry Butler plays, he overwhelms with the authority of his instrument. A full-on player who ignores none of the black-and-whites for long, his is a big sound. Within it, too, is a sense of risk. That the pianist, in his headlong style, is taking the music to the edge. Even on a lovely standard jazz ballad, Butler is never content to leave a tune alone. He taunts it, manipulates it, and delivers it to fruition.

"The goal is to bring something to the piano that is yours," says Butler, a philosophy he plays by and teaches to his students. "The piano is waiting for you to demand its services."

Performance and education have been the two key elements in Henry Butler's life. Born in New Orleans, Butler first discovered the piano at a neighbor's home at age six, and immediately enjoyed tinkering on the keys. He was encouraged to play by a neighbor woman who told him he had a good ear. Of course, at that

young age he really didn't know what she meant. Nonetheless, when he went off to the Louisiana State School for the Blind on the campus of Southern University in Baton Rouge, he started taking piano lessons. Musical involvement was common amongst the 100 or so students at the school; half were in the music program, and the school employed four music teachers.

"I think part of the reason was that they thought it was okay for blind people to excel in music," reasons Butler. "So it was encouraged and we took advantage of it. Actually, I think we took it for granted until we graduated. Then I realized, 'Man, look what we got!'"

Butler received a musical foundation, learning to play not only piano but also drums, baritone saxophone and valve trombone, as well as to arrange music. In the ninth grade he began playing professionally (i.e. for money) in the Baton Rouge area. In the eleventh grade he switched his major from piano to voice, a direction he maintained through both his college years at Southern of Baton Rouge as well as his post-graduate work at Michigan State. He says the shift in focus was in part due to the unavailability of piano scores in Braille. "As you grow to higher levels of proficiency, it gets tougher to make Braille scores," says Butler, who in his younger years relied on teachers and then himself to produce the scores.

Though Butler had been doing some R&B singing while he gigged around Baton Rouge,

it was during his years at Southern and Michigan that he performed classical material. At recitals he would sing German Lieder, French and Italian art songs, arias and oratorios--all required in his major. When Butler finally returned to New Orleans in the mid-'70s, he taught not piano but voice at the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts (NOCCA). He continues to perform some classical works, mostly in churches, though more often he is heard using his immense vocal talent on jazz and R&B material.

Butler has done some jumping around since his university years, first moving back to New Orleans, then heading to Los Angeles, then to New York City, and most recently to Charleston, Illinois to teach at Eastern Illinois University. At present he is on a leave of absence from the school in order to promote his latest album, *For All Seasons*, his fifth album as leader and his first for the Atlantic Jazz label. He has also been leading workshops and clinics around the country.

"I like being a work in progress," says Butler. "I like being an evolving artist and it's definitely evident. If I start to settle for one thing, I'll give up the ship."

With this leave, a new album and a new label it appears that perhaps Butler is at yet another crossroads in his career and his life.

"over the last decade, he has established himself as the finest all-around pianist in New Orleans, a city known for it's piano masters..."

Jazz Times

