



PRESERVATION HALL JAZZ BAND: THE A LIST

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For its new album, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band made some high-profile friends, but who learned from who?

Since Preservation Hall opened in 1961, it has been the great name in traditional jazz. The venue continues to let the music speak without amplification, and the Preservation Hall Jazz Band has been iconic, representing the city and music despite the inevitable lineup changes over the years. It's the band that everybody knows in concept, but not in detail.

"I'd been to Preservation Hall to see their performances there," Jason Isbell says. Isbell is just one of the guests on Preservation, the new album by the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, and his experience with the Hall and the band is more typical than not. He'd come to New Orleans and stopped in the hall as part of a trip. His awareness of it increased as he toured New Orleans with the Drive-By Truckers and his own 400 Unit. But, he admits, "I never knew much about the Preservation Hall. Once I got caught up on the history, I got more interested in it."

Isbell, like guests including Paulo Nutini, Andrew Bird, Ani DiFranco, Tom Waits, Dr. John, Pete Seeger, Buddy Miller, Steve Earle and Amy LaVere came to Preservation Hall and cut a track live with the Preservation Hall

Jazz Band. It wasn't Isbell's first time cutting a track live, but it wasn't common for him either. "You've got to have good musicians or it can take a really long time," he says.

For Del McCoury, this was a significant change. "He goes back and plugs in all of his vocal tracks," Hall director and tuba player Ben Jaffe says. "So for him to come into a room with seven musicians you've never met before and sing live over a jazz band, it's intimidating. I was blown away with how he came in there and just did it."

Since Jaffe took over as artistic director for Preservation Hall in 1993, the hall and the band have been modernized. Preservation continues in that vein, matching the band with guest artists and broadening the repertoire to introduce more people to the band. Not surprisingly, not everybody shares Jaffe's vision equally. *Preservation* includes folk, blues and Western Swing, and their distance from Preservation Hall's bread and butter concerned 78-year-old clarinetist Charlie Gabriel a little.

"We're not doing the music the way the old musicians did it," he says. "I think we might stray a little bit too far away from the source. But this is a good project; it's geared to the education of the kids. It's incorporating other folks' music into traditional jazz music, which is a good intake. You're incorporating bluegrass into jazz music, which is a good thing."

Richie Havens on guitar with Charlie Gabriel on clarinet by Erika Goldring

Musically, the interaction between the guests and the hall band seems surprisingly easy on the album. In person, it added a dimension to the project. "I don't think they had any idea (who I was)," Isbell says. "I thought Walter (Payton) was asleep until we counted off and started playing. He'd come to life at the last second."

"Richie Havens was a very soulful individual," Gabriel says. "He just sit

right down, and started doing what he would do. Pete Seeger is a wonderful man. You feel good just being in his company. He was a soft-spoken man.”

My Morning Jacket’s Jim James embraced the project. “He came into the hall the night before,” Jaffe says. “I took him through the hall and it was his first time there. We went upstairs above the hall and we were walking through one of the old rooms upstairs and he saw an old amp in the corner with a microphone and he asked me about it. I told him that was Sweet Emma (Barrett)’s amplifier. She used to drag that around New Orleans and that’s what she sang out of.” The next day, James showed up in a suit and sang through her megaphone and amp.

“It was very surreal,” James says via email, “because I had a dream the night before we did the session where a spirit was breathed into my mouth through a hole in the floor. I carried the spirit for awhile, then when I put my lips to the bullhorn, I felt I was breathing that spirit back out into this world from the dream world and into Preservation Hall. I felt Sweet Emma’s ghost howling through my heart.”

Preservation has already produced a number of small victories. The band got to work with member Clint Maedgen’s musical hero, Tom Waits, and My Morning Jacket is taking the Preservation Hall Jazz Band on tour with it this spring. “I think it will give the audience a deeper insight into where a lot of the music we enjoy comes from.”

Jason Isbell learned to play his song correctly—“there was one chord I was playing as a major 7th and it’s a minor 7th”—but he also learned something from the band. “It’s such a part of their life to create music that it wasn’t anything extraordinary for them, and I like that a lot. I think music should be like that sometimes without bells and whistles.”

-Alex Rawls