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# Hall of Champions: All-Star Musicians Team With Preservation Hall Jazz Band



**The new album of surprising collaborations with Preservation Hall—New Orleans’ bastion of traditional jazz—started with Tom Waits and a sign from God.** In that order.

In the early fall of 2005, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band shared a bill with Waits, among others, at a Hurricane Katrina benefit at Radio City Music Hall. During a lull

backstage, Preservation Hall creative director Ben Jaffe and vocalist/reed man Clint Maedgen—both huge fans—noticed Waits alone, leaning against a wall.

“I had my tuba,” Jaffe says. “I said, OK, Clint, let’s go. This is never gonna happen again.” They chatted with Waits. They played him a song. They got a phone number. “Since then, for years, at least once a week Clint and I would have our conversation about what we were gonna do with Tom,” he says. Jaffe dug out an old song called “Tootie Ma Is A Big Fine Thing,” which appeared as an extra track on a Baby Dodds Trio CD—the original 1940s vinyl was possibly the first commercial waxing of a Mardi Gras Indian street chant. That, they decided, would be the song they’d do someday with Waits. Jaffe sat on it until, one day, sifting through stacks of records at the Hall archive, the first album he pulled out was one of those rare original 78-RPM copies of “Tootie Ma.” He mailed it to Waits along with a 78 player and a note asking him if he’d like to record it at the Hall. Months passed before he finally got an email back: When were they available to record?

“I took it as a sign from God that Tom Waits was going to record ‘Tootie Ma Is A Big Fine Thing’ with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band,” Jaffe says. “I thought, ‘This is the only thing that could possibly convince him—to give him the only copy I’ve ever seen in my life.’”

“Tootie Ma” is a standout on *Preservation*, the band’s new album, which also includes collaborations between the Hall band and a diverse assortment of artists including Andrew Bird, Brandi Carlile, Richie Havens, Pete Seeger, Del McCoury and Jim James of My Morning Jacket. Every track was recorded live at the Hall, and almost all the songs are traditional and public domain, done in the classic Hall style—acoustic hot jazz with banjo, clarinet and brass—that has remained New Orleans’ hallmark sound since the late 19th century.

Preservation Hall itself is a major tourist attraction, but it’s not touristy in the least. In a ramshackle wooden building in the French Quarter, elderly men in black suits and ties play the traditional New Orleans jazz they’ve played for half a century or more, music passed down to them from men who often had learned it the century before last. It’s the real deal. Jaffe, 39, took over stewardship of the Hall from his parents the week after graduating from Oberlin in 1993. As he updates it for the 21st century, he walks a line: keeping tradition sacred, but also relevant and exciting for a new generation.

“At 22, when I took over,” Jaffe says, “I was petrified that when the original Preservation Hall band passed away that we’d cease to exist. But by the late ‘90s [as some original members were replaced] I began to see that people would still come

see us for this very real New Orleans experience.”

The collaborators on *Preservation* seem to feel the same way. Carlile recorded the traditional hymn “The Old Rugged Cross” on a Sunday, with Hall guitarist/banjo player Carl LeBlanc, a veteran of the last incarnation of Sun Ra’s Arkestra. “The Preservation Hall band’s performance of these standards and their obvious passion and roots in New Orleans music sets the bar tremendously high for recording artists in any genre,” Carlile says. “I think the pairing of the performers with the Preservation Hall band bridges gaps in a really cool way.