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Preservation Party: On the Ground at New Orleans Jazz Fest

A little before 3 a.m. on April 25th, the past and promise of American music collided, with funk and ecstasy, at Preservation Hall in New Orleans. In that venerable French Quarter storefront, with its bare-walls decor and resident spirits of past jazz masters, the house combo — the Preservation Hall Jazz Band — and Southern-rock futurists My Morning Jacket played Curtis Mayfield's "Move On Up" as a 12-piece unplugged supergroup. MMJ singer Jim James, decked out like a riverboat card shark, let his falsetto fly in the reverb-free room, through a lusty thicket of brass and frantic acoustic picking. Then the Preservation Hall cats, with MMJ drummer Patrick Hallahan, filed out of the club and took the music into St. Peter Street, leading the audience on a second-line parade and pulling surprised drinkers out of nearby bars into the wake.

You hear music like this — then and next, entangled and incandescent — all the time in New Orleans. But there is nothing even in this city like a Jazz Fest weekend, for the concentration of shocks and highs. For me, this year's New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival — which started on April 23rd and climaxes on May 4th, over 12 stages at the Fair Grounds Race

Course — started early, the night before opening day at the corner of Bourbon and Canal Streets. The eight-piece To Be Continued Brass Band, which holds regular court there, played hard for spare change, combining brass-army unison with funk-rock bravado. At one point, the funeral-parade harmonies of three trombones and two trumpets veered into Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" — proof that no matter where the music hails from, it becomes local property.

Check out Rolling Stone's On the Road feature with My Morning Jacket in the next issue, on sale May 12th.

Hard Rain

At the Fair Grounds, near-tornado winds and soaking rain were an extra trying attraction on the first afternoon; Chocolate Milk, a New Orleans funk institution with a streak of R&B-chart hits in the Seventies, and honorary blues-rock citizens the Black Crowes played through downpours. It was merely gray and humid when a young New Orleans group, the Revivalists, kicked off the day with a Crescent City-rhythm spin on jam-band jubilee and, at the end of the set, a barely-R-rated burlesque troupe. Singer-guitarist David Shaw had a dash of Dave Matthews in his crusted tenor, but there was a heavy-rock spring in the Revivalists' strut, and pedal-steel guitarist Ed Williams added distinctive wah-wah-treated scream to "Appreciate Me" and "Soul's Too Loud," both from the group's new album, *Vital Signs*.

Across the field, the Comanche Hunters, a Mardi Gras Indian tribe, challenged the darkening skies with traditional chants and the first "Hey Pocky Way" of the weekend. Later, at the Lagniappe Stage, tucked away in the Fair Grounds grandstand, singer-guitarist Spencer Bohren sang into and with the showers in a warming solo-blues set. He opened with the traditional "Wade in the Water" — which is all you could do on the premises — and finished with Elmore James' "The Sky Is Crying," mirroring the torrent with long silver tears on his pedal-steel guitar.

Heavy Air

One of the best examples of whiplash and mashup on the first weekend was the early-Saturday set by the trombone-rock band Bonerama. Their first number was a dirt-brown-acid take on "The Other One" by the Grateful Dead's 1968 album, *Anthem of the Sun*. The Dead's Bob Weir famously infuriated their producer on that album, Dave Hassinger, by demanding the sound of "heavy air." Bonerama's front line — Mark Mullins, Craig Klein and Greg Hicks — brought its own, with a rough gliding bluster and ensemble-power chords. The group also paid striking tribute to the late Alex Chilton with a medley of "The Letter" by the Box Tops and Big Star's "O My Soul," the trombones grunting like crunchy-treble Stratocasters caked in mud.

On Sunday, the ex-Band drummer Levon Helm brought his big band and the anything-goes spirit of his Midnight Rambles, the weekend sessions he throws at his Woodstock barn-studio, to the Acura Stage. Dr. John stepped to the mike and piano for "Such a Night," and Allen Toussaint, who arranged the horns on the Band's 1972 live album, *Rock of Ages*, led the group through "A Certain Girl". Howard Johnson, who played in the *Rock of Ages* brass section, was present on baritone sax and tuba, while Ivan Neville sat in on Hammond organ through most of the set.

But Helm, who turns 70 on May 26th, was the center of the euphoria, drumming with youthful force and R&B conscience in the deceptively boozy gallop of "The Shape I'm In" and a the plaintive-metal stomp "Chest Fever." He chooses his vocal moments carefully, a legacy of his fight with throat cancer, but sang harmonies of "Long Black Veil" and the Dead's "Tennessee Jed" with high clarity. At one point, while playing mandolin in "Deep Ellum Blues," Helm jumped off his stool and went into a bent-knee crouch, shaking his hips like he wasn't a day over *Stage Fright*. "Thank you, Levon Helm," Toussaint said after his number, bowing to the drummer, then added, "American treasure, Levon Helm." It was not an exaggeration.

Rockin' at Preservation Hall

My Morning Jacket's appearance with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, on the latter's home ground, was an inspired detour on their current tour together, sparked by Jim James' appearance on the jazz group's new all-star benefit album, *Preservation*. My Morning Jacket headlined at the Fair Grounds on Saturday afternoon, bringing the jazzmen onstage for a few numbers. Incredibly, Jim James and the Preservation Hall guys were back out there for a lunchtime set on Sunday, only a few hours after that second-line parade.

Preservation Hall was founded by Allan Jaffe in 1961, literally to preserve traditional New Orleans jazz and provide a playing home for its originators and, as they passed away, their successors. The band now flourishes under the direction of Allen's son, tuba player Ben Jaffe. And on their turf, James was all antique decorum, singing "St. James Infirmary" through a megaphone with Charlie Gabriel's clarinet nipping at his heels, then against the mocking growl of Frederick Lonzo's trombone.

But My Morning Jacket also took over the room for an extended pure-acoustic set, featuring ingeniously reconceived arrangements of songs such as "Golden," "Wonderful (The Way I Feel)" and "Dondante." The close-up circumstances — a few dozen people literally pressed up against the band — made the quiet feel orchestral, and James exploited the enforced absence of his usual oceans of vocal echo with a natural melodic concentration. In "Wonderful," his falsetto floated over the light bass and soft, thumping kick drum like birdsong.

The combined Preservation-Jacket big band soon made snorting-brass sass of "Highly Suspicious," and there were hearty versions of the Ernie K-Doe hit "Mother-in-Law" and the Mardi Gras anthem "Carnival Time," sung by the guy who cut it in 1959, Al Johnson. "Transcendental would be an understatement," James said at one point — his eyes wide with awe on a night of delightful risk, in a room where the history of American music is always present and alive, in a city where the transcendent, it seems, is simply routine.