



**ROLLING STONE MAGAZINE**  
**MAY 27, 2010 ISSUE**

## **My Morning Jacket Take New Orleans**

Band follows Jazz Fest set with spooky show at tiny Preservation Hall

**By Brian Hiatt**

A long white bus is struggling around a tight corner in New Orleans' French Quarter, and inside, the five members of My Morning Jacket are listening to a dead man sing a ghostly tune. It's just before midnight on a warm Saturday in late April, and a few hours earlier, the band was playing larger-than-life versions of anthems from "I'm Amazed" to "Mahgeetah" for an overflowing crowd of thousands at Jazz Fest. **Now, MMJ are on their way to the day's second engagement, an unrehearsed acoustic benefit gig in teensy, decaying, 200-year-old Preservation Hall, home to the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, the opening group on the Jacket's current tour. "This will be a dream show," says drummer Patrick Hallahan "We can play anything we want."**

Frontman Jim James has been sitting quietly up front next to his girlfriend, but as the sinuous guitar chords of the late Dennis Yost and the Classics IV's 1968 garage-noir nugget "Spooky" pop up on the bus stereo, he perks up and addresses the driver: "Can you turn up the radio?" Between sips from a cup of Maker's Mark, keyboardist Bo Koster chimes in: "Can you turn down the lights?" The song blasts, the bus goes dark. Everyone cheers. For two minutes we inch down a quiet side street, grooving in the blackness, with Hallahan paying air drums and James quietly singing along with the chorus: "Love is kinda crazy with a spooky little girl like you." Then the song fades and a loud insurance ad comes on. "You can turn it down now," James says. "But thanks -

that was really a moment." **James fell in love with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band's time-capsule sound in March 2009, when he recorded two songs with them for the benefit album *Preservation*.** In a career more or less split between vintage Americana and futuristic experimentation, playing with the Jazz Band is as deep into the past as My Morning Jacket have gone. **"The first night we played with them, it really was like a time machine," James says. "I felt like we were way, way back. Their sound is so rich, so multidimensional, without anything amplified or anything electronic. But it's not like a throwback thing. It's like an immortal kind of thing"** On yet another trip to New Orleans, James befriended gold-toothed, cape wearing singer Al "Carnival Time" Johnson, who took his nickname from his lone local hit, a Mardi Gras staple that sounds like a lost Fats Domino classic. At Jazz Fest, they bring him out to sing his song, backed by the Jazz Band horns, transforming themselves into an early-Sixties New Orleans R&B band. As Johnson leaves the fairgrounds, he's asked how it felt up there. He pauses, then says, "It felt like carnival time!" MMJ step onto the woodfloor stage of Preservation Hall around 1 a.m. and begin with the title track of their second album *At Dawn*. **It's as hushed and intimate as a rock band can get: James is singing through an old microphone plugged into a small Fender guitar amp, and bassist Tom Blankenship is using a small amp of his own, but the rest of the instruments are entirely unamplified** - you hear every brush of James' and Carl Broemel's guitar picks.

The set is heavy on the band's delicate acoustic songs - "Golden" is stunning - but it hits an unlikely peak with electro-funk of **"Highly Suspicious," which by all rights should be a disaster without technology. Instead, with Preservation Hall bandleader Ben Jaffe's tuba taking the place of the synth-bass, it's an unexpectedly powerful clatter of brass and percussion - it sounds like Prince taking over lead vocals on a Tom Waits album.**

Earlier, during the Jazz Band's own set, James came out to croon "Louisiana Fairytale" in a nearly unrecognizable voice, employing an old-timey, Al Jolson-esque vibrato. **Before delivering an**

**intense version of "St. James Infirmary" - singing so hard he turned red and trembled - he told the story of the spiritual experience that bonded him forever with Preservation Hall.**

As the story goes, James was sleeping in his hotel the night before his recording session at the Hall when he fell into a vivid dream. He was 12 years old and living in an orphanage, where he befriended another orphan, a young girl - who eventually disappeared. One day, dream James heard her voice coming up through floorboards in the basement. "I put my mouth up to a hole in the floor to yell down to her, and she put her mouth against my mouth and breathed her spirit into me. I was, like, sucking her ghost into me." The next morning, James arrived at Preservation Hall, where he was given a decades-old-bullhorn - once used by early group vocalist Sweet Emma Barrett - to sing through. When he put his mouth on it, his dream suddenly came back to him. **"It was almost as if [the ghost] wanted me to carry her for a little while and blow her back out into Preservation Hall," James says. "That's the kind of shit that can only happen in New Orleans."**

**The evening ends with one more only-in-New Orleans moment, as the entire Preservation Hall Jazz Band marches out into the street, gesturing for the audience to follow in a second-line parade.** It's past three in the morning, but for 20 minutes they march triumphantly through block after block followed by a growing crowd, with Hallahan on extra percussion. By the time the band heads back into the Hall, any sleeping ghosts in the neighborhood are surely wide-awake. *-by Brian Hiatt*