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## NEVILLE BROTHERS

*"Music was just in our blood: something we had to do."*  
By Jason Berry (for A&M Records)

**T**he history of New Orleans music is the story of sounds—from the early trumpet of Louis Armstrong, so tight and strong and sweet, to the rippling, rhumba-studded piano rolls of Professor Longhair, the sound extends. The sound has changed from the old days of Dixieland, from the flush days of Rhythm-and-Blues in the '50s, and from the heyday of funk played by the Meters and Dr. John in the '60s and early '70s. But always in New Orleans music you hear an echo of distinctive city sounds—the river, black Indians at Carnival, the rich street language, the movement of feet in a parade, the big drumbeat of a Second Line.

With *Fiyo on the Bayou*, the Neville Brothers have taken the New Orleans sound a large step forward. Of all the bands playing in the city today, amidst a flourishing revival of jazz and R&B, the Nevilles command the strongest following, a tribe of fans. The Neville Brothers—Art, Charles, Aaron and Cyril—are a musical family, trained on piano and percussion, with heavy influences by their uncle, George Landry, one of the great Mardi Gras Indian leaders who, by the time of his death last summer, had become a folk hero known as "Big Chief Jolly."

Various combinations of the Nevilles have been making records for twenty-five years; but only since 1977 has the Neville family sound emerged in full. Art, 43, is the oldest brother and leader of the band. As a teenager in 1954, he sang lead vocal on a tune called "Mardi Gras Mambo," with a band called the Hawkettes. "Mambo" is now a seasonal standard, played on most New Orleans radio stations and tavern jukeboxes during Carnival and, played best by the Neville Brothers.

On his own, Art cut several regional hits in the '50s, like "Cha Dooky Do" and the moody love ballad, "All These Things," recently revived by country star Joe Stampley. But the musical impetus in Art Neville's life came from his late parents. His father, Big Arthur, "was what you call a shower singer: he sang in the bathtub a lot. And my mother (Amelia) exposed us to all kinds of music—Fats Domino, Professor Longhair, Ivory Joe Hunter, Ella Fitzgerald. Music was just in our blood: it was something we had to do."

In 1969, Art formed the Meters, the band that pioneered the New Orleans funk sound, cut nine albums and toured Europe and the United States with the Rolling Stones. But in 1977, Art left the Meters to form the Neville Brothers band. It was a gutsy decision. The Meters' *New Directions* album had just been released, but Art was determined to forge a new sound, based on the intricate group harmonies which the brothers knew from years of kinship, and the deepening influence of their Uncle Jolly, the Mardi Gras Indian leader.

As children in the Calliope housing project, Art, Charles and Aaron took sticks and combs and rattled percussive rhythms on the window ledges and bannister rails. "Hey Pocky Way," one of the most exciting dance songs in the pantheon of New Orleans music, was originally a street chant which the boys heard and, in later years, was a song performed by the black Indian tribes of Carnival. In 1976, the Nevilles came together on the *Wild Tchoupitoulas* LP (now a cult classic in Europe); and it was their Uncle, George "Big Chief Jolly" Landry, who with youngest brother Cyril Neville, took the Indian chants and orchestrated music up from the streets.

(over please)





Charles Neville, 42, is something of a renaissance man in New Orleans cultural circles. A saxophonist who plays percussion and sings, Charles left home at 15 to join the Rabbit's Foot Minstrel Show. He was in and out of New Orleans over the years, playing road tours with B. B. King and Bobby Bland, and moved to New York in the late '60s for a career in progressive jazz. Charles returned to New Orleans in the late '70s when the Neville Band was formed.

His career has blossomed since then. He plays with various progressive jazz groups in spare moments, and created with writer Dalt Wonk, a stage musical called *Shangri-La*. The play is based on the old Dew Drop Inn, hub of black entertainers in the 1950's. Based on Charles' memories of the club, *Shangri-La* follows several characters in the bar, on stage and in the audience, through a night of illuminating revelations about their deeper human struggles. *Shangri-La* appears often in New Orleans and has been critically well-received. The authors are trying to get it to New York.

Aaron Neville, 40, is one of the most gifted vocalists in the country. Locally, he's sometimes known as "golden throat." His 1966 ballad "Tell It Like It Is" rose to number two in the national record charts and put the young singer deep into the hearts of New Orleans music fans. More recently, Aaron sang the theme song for the film, *Heartbeat*, based on the life of Jack Kerouac.

Aaron's stunning falsetto has been refined through a sustained devotion to many kinds of songs. He is equally at home in the gospel tradition—Aaron Neville singing "Precious Lord" will put faith in heathens—and moves with ease through early R&B and rock 'n' roll. Aaron is the heart of the Nevilles' four-part harmonies. Aaron's lyrical reach, set behind Cyril's work as main vocalist on the new rendition of "Brother John" is one of the most accomplished tunes on *Fiyo on the Bayou*—a step beyond the Brothers' harmonizing as heard to date.

Thirty-two-year-old Cyril is the youngest Neville, an exceptional vocalist who, with Art, sets the Nevilles' percussive rhythmic pace, on conga drums. An expressive vocalist with a body language influenced by the tours with Mick Jagger and the Stones, Cyril was lead vocalist on the Meters' hit, "Be My Lady."

One of Cyril's most memorable experiences was the Stones' appearance in Barcelona. "This night the Stones played a short set and we came on and did all of the N'Awlins stuff—under a full moon, in a bullring, in Barcelona, Spain, and we were received like, 'olé, olé, olé!'"

Last summer, after one of the most dramatic jazz funerals ever held in New Orleans, George Landry was laid to rest. The Nevilles' uncle performed on Bourbon Street as a teenager with his sister, Amelia, who later married Big Arthur. "Uncle Jolly," as the boys came to know him, was a sailor for many years, always returning from foreign ports with stories about his travels. Charles recalls, "To Jolly, the sea was like the open plains." Jolly settled in New Orleans, and in the early '70s became involved with street rituals of the black Indian tribes, and soon formed the Wild Tchoupitoulas, named for the street traversing the Mississippi River docks.

The Wild Tchoupitoulas come from the Nevilles' neighborhood, the Valence Street area. "Valence Street is the roots," says Aaron, "the stompin' grounds." Jolly was a folk hero, first to the kids on Valence, soon to scores of adoring fans who rose before dawn each Mardi Gras to see the magic moment when he burst out of his house, feathers radiant, to lead his tribe. The music Jolly tapped out on his tambourine, and in rarer moments on piano, became yet another current within the polyrhythms of the Neville sound. In *Fiyo on the Bayou*, that music rises to new heights.