THE NEVILLE BROTHERS

DOIN' IT FOR THE FAMILY

HE STANDS on the stage in blue denim and black leather, a big man singing a tender song. "Okay, so your heart is broken," Aaron Neville croons with a feathery vibrato. The setting sun glints off his heavy jewelry while his rough jail-house tattoos are barely visible to the audience at the Shoreline Amphitheater, south of San Francisco. The man looks burly and muscular enough to snap his mike stand in half without much effort; the voice sounds so seraphic and crystalline that it's easy to imagine it's floating over San Francisco Bay and up to heaven.

Bent forward at the waist and squinting his eyes tightly as if to shut out everything but the words, Neville caresses a 1972 Main Ingredient hit. "Everybody plays the fool, sometimes," he sings gently, giving the familiar song a new grace. "There's no exception to the rule."

BROTHER'S KEEPERS: AARON, ART, CYRIL AND CHARLES NEVILLE (CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT)

BY STEVE POND

And make no mistake, this fifty-year-old man knows about playing the fool, and the victim, and a host of other taxing roles. Today he's got a new solo album, a pair of Grammy awards for duets he recorded with Linda Ronstadt and two consecutive Best Male Singer awards in ROLLING STONE's critics' poll. Since the mid-Fifties, though, his life has included jail, drugs, hard physical labor, great music that went unheard and hit songs for which he wasn't paid. His is a story of an enormous gift and a strong faith that just barely overcame decades of hard times; if the audience sees a big man singing a tender song, those who know the story also see a strong man singing a triumphant song.

But he's not alone. Behind him onstage are his three brothers, the Neville Brothers – and if Aaron has a remarkable story to tell, each of these men has a tale as frightening and as rich as his.

The oldest of them is fifty-three, the youngest forty-three; they've been doing this separately for almost forty years, together for fifteen. They've been cheated,

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LOU SALVATORI

jailed, swindled and addicted; they've been on the verge of success for so long that it's a wonder they haven't given up. The Rolling Stones love them, Huey Lewis touts them, Bonnie Raitt and Bette Midler sing with them or sing their praises, John Goodman and Dennis Quaid and Don Johnson and Ed Bradley hang out with them. For years they were ostracized by the record industry. That, however, has changed: Every time the Nevilles put out an album, admirers predict it'll be the one to win them the recognition they deserve. It never is, but their legend grows anyway.

At Shoreline – where they've come to help promoter Bill Graham stage his annual New Orleans by the Bay, his valiant but fruitless attempt to bring the spirit of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival to Northern California – the Neville Brothers dominate the stage, while their crack three-piece band stays back. At the far left is Cyril, his dreadlocks spilling out from underneath a black cap as he pounds an array of percussion instruments. Then Aaron, alternately whacking a cowbell and stepping forward to cut the air with his angelic falsetto. Then Charles, a slight figure in a tie-dyed T-shirt wielding an alto sax. Then Art, anchoring the band behind a bank of keyboards at the far right of the stage. If the music they play is an invigorating blend of the styles that have flourished in the Crescent City over the past century – R&B, soul, jazz, funk, reggae and anything else that came down the Mississippi or across the Atlantic, plus the pure pop balladry of Aaron – then the band itself is also a precarious blend. "Cyril brings a lotta fire, you know?" says Aaron, trying to explain the alchemy. "Art brings a lotta funk. Charles adds some jazz and be-bop. And I guess I kinda put the icing on the cake."

But Aaron Neville is more than just icing: For decades he's been the best-known and most visible Neville Brother. But today, when he finishes "Everybody Plays the Fool" and then a heart-stopping version of his twenty-five-year-old make-out masterpiece "Tell It Like It Is," he steps back, picks up a red, crescent-shaped tambourine and surrenders the stage to his brothers. There won't be another Aaron Neville solo turn for the remainder of this show; instead, Aaron becomes but one of three singers.

Even though Aaron's just released a new solo album, *Warm Your Heart*, he's spending the summer simply touring as one of the Neville Brothers and doing a short set of solo tunes in the middle of the show. To do otherwise would mean abandoning what he calls "the mothership." "That's my tribe," Aaron says simply. "I gotta be with the tribe. 'Cause then I get to hear the funkiest band in the world too, you know? We was *put* here to be together, so we *gonna* be together."

"THE NEVILLE BROTHERS are about family," says Malcolm Burn, who coproduced last year's *Brother's Keeper*. "And family not only encompasses direct blood ties, but it also includes other musicians who didn't make it. The only difference between these guys and a lot of other New Orleans musicians is that these guys survived. Guys like James Booker or Gerald Tillman or people were amazing musicians but didn't make it. They overdosed on drugs or they spent more time in jail than they spent making music. And the Neville Brothers have been through that to a certain extent, as well. They've been involved in drugs or criminal activities or jail, but I think what they represent is getting over it and surviving."

Art Neville is the patriarch of the family and the rock that solidifies the band. Art doesn't say much; around outsiders he puts on a poker face that reveals nothing. He has a dry, playful sense of humor, but it takes time to find it; a torrent of words waits to come out, but at first you hear a deep, indecipherable mumble. At fifty-three, Art's been on the road since before rock & roll had a name – his roots are in uptown New Orleans, and they run deep. "I ain't going nowhere," he says, and laughs. "The only way I'm leaving is to blow me off, and I'll make sure nobody but me has the dynamite."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: THE METERS, ARTHUR NEVILLE, AARON CIRCA 1966, AMELIA NEVILLE

LONDON FEATURES(TOP LEFT); MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES(BOTTOM RIGHT)

Art's home is at the center of the Neville universe, on Valence Street in the Thirteenth Ward. It's on a nondescript avenue lined by aging wooden houses, in an area where people are more concerned with getting by than with selling tourists a good time. The Neville Brothers are an institution here, where families like theirs pass down music as an inheritance; where music is a lifeblood as sure as the Mississippi River is one; where that music can be used to forget one's troubles and also to renew the bonds of community, neighborhood and family.

This is where Arthur and Amelia Neville raised their family. The oldest child, Art joined the Hawketts, a local band, when he was sixteen and cut the perennial New Orleans anthem "Mardi Gras Mambo," earning twelve dollars for his efforts. Then he fell in with Larry Williams, a New Orleans musician who had hits with "Bony Moronie" and "Short Fat Fannie" and who was known around town to be involved in a potpourri of illegalities. "Yeah, I knew there was another side," Art admits. "But he never got me involved in it."

Art made records – some, like "All These Things," regional hits – but he paid the bills with manual labor until the late Sixties, when he formed Art Neville and the Neville Sound with brothers Aaron and Cyril. The band's rhythm section – drummer Joseph "Ziggy" Modeliste and bassist George Porter Jr. – was the funkiest in New Orleans, and soon the group got an offer to play a high-profile Bourbon Street club. But the stage was only large enough for four musicians; Art, Modeliste, Porter and guitarist Leo Nocentelli took the gig and were rechristened the Meters, while Aaron and Cyril formed the Soul Machine.

The Meters quickly became the house band for local producer-songwriter-performer Allen Toussaint, then cut their own records, including hits like "Cissy Strut." "We didn't know how big that record was," says Art. "We played six nights a week from six o'clock at night to five o'clock in the morning for almost two years, and we didn't know we had a hit record. Nobody told us. I mean, somebody was collecting the money, but we wound up *owing* money."

The Meters were among the most influential funk musicians of the time, but some saw a potential conflict of interest: Toussaint and his partner Marshall Sehorn produced the records, managed the band and owned both the studio where the records were made and the songs' publishing rights. "I witnessed stuff that has, you know, become myth and legend in the music business now, like the Meters," says Cyril, who later became an unofficial fifth member. "They credit Allen Toussaint as producer, or Marshall Sehorn. I was *there*. I was in the fucking studio when we sat on the floor and came up with the lyrics and just played, you know? *That's* producing. Not coming in the studio every now and then and saying, 'Hey, how's it going?' "

As for Art, he says he's friends with Toussaint and bears no ill will toward the many businesspeople who, over the years, made things difficult for him and his brothers. "Sure, I thought about taking revenge," Art says. "I wouldn't be human if I didn't think about it. But if I'd went after it, I wouldn't be here appreciating and enjoying what's happening now. I'd be locked up in somebody's prison, you know, in a dungeon."

Instead, Art can now sit in his house on Valence Street and celebrate survival. "A lotta people predicted this wouldn't last, this Neville Brothers thing," he says with a touch of glee in his deep rumble. "But you can't stop running water, and that's the way I look at the Neville Brothers. No matter what happens, we're gonna keep flowing."

"I LIVED ON PEANUT BUTTER for a while," says Eric Struthers. The Nevilles and their band are riding on their tour bus, talking about hard times. "And I lived on egg sandwiches for a while, too. Because when you're *really* broke, eggs are cheaper than peanut butter."

This draws a dumbfounded look from Charles Neville. "*What?*" he says, genuinely confused. "You couldn't shoplift a jar of peanut butter?"

Charles is the most schooled musician in the band and the one who, even in the mid-Eighties, lived in Oregon

while his brothers stayed in the old neighborhood. He's the band's most willing public spokesman and a longtime follower of Eastern religions and t'ai chi ch'uan. And he's the one who had the biggest problems with the law and with drugs.

A year younger than Art, Charles left home, got married and went on the road at age fifteen. On tour and as a member of the house band at New Orleans' fabled Dew Drop Inn, he spent the next few years playing with the likes of B.B. King, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Ray Charles, Johnny Ace, Ruth Brown and Aretha Franklin. At the time, he admits, he bought the same fallacy as many other jazz musicians: To play like Charlie Parker, you needed to take heroin like Charlie Parker. "I became a hustler when I got out of the navy," Charles says. "I was strung out, so I had to have money every day. All the people I knew who were using, they were shoplifters, so they taught me the trade."

He first went to jail for shoplifting in 1958, then again in 1960. Then, in 1962, he was arrested for possession of marijuana – two joints' worth. Rather than stand trial, he skipped town, and when the law finally caught up with him in 1964, his two joints and two years of bail-jumping got him sentenced to five years of hard labor in Louisiana State Prison at Angola. He served three years, got out and headed for New York's Greenwich Village, where he played with everyone from jazzman Tiny Grimes, soul singer O.V. Wright, popsters Joey Dee and the Starlighters to Jimi Hendrix.

Charles stayed in New York for a decade, playing with his brothers when they came to town. At one point in the early Seventies, for instance, he, Aaron and Cyril formed a band and dubbed themselves the Wild Tchoupitoulas, after the Mardi Gras Indian tribe fronted by their uncle. They couldn't afford elaborate costumes, so they sewed beads and feathers onto their clothes and played New York's tony Upper East Side. "We walked into this place with our jeans and our denim jackets with the sleeves cut off," Charles says, "and people started clutching their purses. But when Aaron started singing, their forks stopped in midair."

All this time – and indeed, into the Eighties – Charles still had his heroin habit. "There were periods when I was clean for as long as a year or two, and then I'd go back," he says. "Most of the clean time was in jail, though. So I'd get clean and be all right for a while, and then I'd get disgusted with things and say, 'Aw, what the fuck?' It was a battle I had to fight over and over."

"WHEN DID YOU realize you had a special voice?"

A small grin plays at the sides of Aaron's mouth. "When the doctor slapped me," he says, "and I said, 'Aah-*aahhhh*-an-ah-aaah . . .' " He sings an exquisite, classic Aaron Neville trill; it makes for a hell of a punch line, so Aaron breaks into a high-pitched giggle.

It's an incongruous laugh for someone his size, but then Aaron Neville is a true dichotomy. He is a forbidding-looking man who doesn't let strangers penetrate his icy façade but whose friends call him a "a gentle soul"; a gifted vocalist who doesn't have much critical insight into music, who's just as happy singing schmaltz as top-notch material; an artist who for much of his life made his living by the strength of his hands; and a deeply religious man who spent years toying with the darkness. "Aaron was a thug, basically," says a friend. "He was a real mean sonofabitch. I mean, all that tattoo stuff, that's for real. And the religious stuff that he's into so deeply, that's really to counteract that other side of him." Aaron will admit that his talent sustained him through the roughest times. "Sometimes I sing to absorb some of the bullshit in life, to make up for some of the bad things going on," he says quietly.

His "career" started early, when as a kid he'd sing his way into movies and basketball games. But, like brother Art, he fell in with Larry Williams – singing and touring but also, say friends, becoming part of Williams's burglary ring. In 1958, at the age of seventeen, he went to jail for car theft. While serving his six months, he wrote a poem that was set to music as "Every Day," one of the first songs he cut when he began recording in 1960.

"SOMETIMES I SING TO ABSORB SOME OF THE BULLSHIT IN LIFE," SAYS AARON.

He suffered through the usual restrictive contracts and disappearing royalties, but in 1960, "Over You" was a small hit, and six years later "Tell It Like It Is" hit Number Two. He never saw any money from the song, but he got $10,000 for recording a quick album. "When 'Tell It Like It Is' was out, I was making music as my main thing for about two years," he says. "And then I had to get back down to basics and go to work again." He drove a truck, dug ditches, worked on the waterfront and turned to drugs to escape. He also recorded a number of songs for Allen Toussaint, most of which were never released.

Then Uncle Jolly called. Jolly, a.k.a. George Landry, was the leader of the *real* Wild Tchoupitoulas, one of the gangs of blacks who attired themselves in Indian costumes and symbolically "fought" one another in song every Mardi Gras. After their parents' deaths, Uncle Jolly asked his nephews to help him record the old songs. Arthur and Amelia, he said, would have wanted it.

The Wild Tchoupitoulas was the first record on which all four Neville brothers appeared; with backing from the Meters, it was one of the most original and undeniable dance records of the Seventies. The Meters were falling apart at the time, so the Neville Brothers were formed. Their first record, *The Neville Brothers*, was a mainstream-sounding record that didn't contain much New Orleans funk and didn't sell. After its release, Capitol Records dropped them. Their second, *Fiyo on the Bayou*, was a slick but funky version of their live show. Though a favorite of fans, it didn't sell either, and A&M Records, in turn, dropped them.

"At the time, our lives weren't really together," says Charles of those difficult days, when businessmen were giving them trouble. "And the frustration, knowing that these people were not dealing fairly with us, helped to keep me feeling like 'I've got enemies. In order to make it, I've gotta fight. And if I'm gonna fight these people, I need to hate 'em.' "

The Nevilles still made great music – their 1984 live album, *Neville-ization*, released on a small New Orleans label, is a gem – but the major labels stayed away, in part afraid of the band's unsavory reputation and tough look. The brothers knew this and exploited it. "It's real fun to know that people felt like that," says Art with a grin. "Hey, man, we couldn't help it if we looked like we were gonna take you out. If people thought like that, I figured nobody was gonna mess with me."

Slowly, the story changed and the drug use lessened. "By the time Aaron was straight, I was almost straight," says Charles. "And by the time I was straight, Cyril was almost straight. And by the middle of the Eighties or the last half of the Eighties, we had all gotten it together." But even though Bill Graham had taken over their management by then, labels were still wary. "Everyone was scared as shit of them," says Morty Wiggins, who manages the Nevilles from Graham's office.

Finally, in 1986, EMI signed them to their first major-label deal in five years. But the resulting record, *Uptown*, was specifically designed to get airplay; purists were scandalized, and radio didn't want to hear from a group of middle-aged black men. "If they coulda found some other Neville Brothers that looked the way that shit sounded," says Cyril, "maybe it woulda worked."

Throughout everything, Aaron kept singing. He did recording sessions and then watched the results languish on the shelf; he made tapes at home when companies wouldn't release his songs. He met Linda Ronstadt in New Orleans in 1984, sang a few doo-wop oldies with her onstage and talked about a collaboration, which kept getting postponed. And even during the worst times, in the depths of his heroin addiction, when he was separated from his wife, he prayed.

And however bad things got, Aaron knew God hadn't abandoned him, because every time he opened his mouth he heard a sound that could only have been a divine gift. "Singing made me feel that there's something besides this," he says. "That there's a reason for it, you know? Singing the Ave Maria brought me through a lotta hard

times, when if I'd have just been the average person, I don't know if I coulda made it."

IN A BACKSTAGE dressing room, Cyril Neville lowers his voice conspiratorially. "A lotta times when we all do interviews together," he says, glancing at his brothers in the other corner of the small room, "they don't print very much of what I say. Because I see these things differently."

At forty-three, Cyril is the youngest Neville by seven years; he's also, it seems, the angriest Neville, the one who wants to talk politics, show off the handcuff marks on his wrists and lecture about the ways in which young black males are oppressed. He is of a different generation than his brothers, though he grew up watching them play and hearing the cream of New Orleans rock & roll at home.

"By the time I was ten or eleven," Cyril says, "there wasn't nothing coulda ever convinced me to do anything other than this." At first he wanted to be James Brown, but later he was inspired by political songwriters like Curtis Mayfield and Bob Marley. He played in the Soul Machine with Aaron, then the early version of the Wild Tchoupitoulas with Aaron and Charles, then the Meters with Art and, finally, the Neville Brothers. "I tell you, man, some of this stuff hurts to talk about," Cyril says when the Nevilles' early records are mentioned. "I don't listen to those records, I can't listen to 'em. I autograph 'em as a courtesy to fans, but it sends a little electric shock through me every time I touch one of 'em."

AARON ONSTAGE WITH LINDA RONSTADT

Lately, though, he doesn't have to touch those early records too often. After the EMI debacle, the Nevilles finally found a new home at their former label A&M – and crucially, a new collaborator in producer Daniel Lanois. For the *Yellow Moon* sessions, Lanois bedecked the recording studio with Spanish moss and voodoo paraphernalia, and his understated, atmospheric production brought out the air of swampy menace that permeated the Nevilles work. The album wasn't a smash hit, but it was a resounding critical success and has sold more than 800,000 copies worldwide. For the follow-up, *Brother's Keeper*, the band wrote songs that were more personal and spiritual. And now Cyril finally has two Neville Brothers albums he can feel good about. "To me," he says, "it makes all that other shit worth going through to have gotten to the point where we can finally go into the studio and put the Neville Brothers on wax. And have people get into it and accept us for what we are.

"It's not like the powers that be haven't tried to take us out," Cyril adds. "I mean, Charles says that we were thugs, or gangsters, or whatever. But I feel that we were all victims, because the paths that young black people take in this society are already basically set for them. I have fallen into every pitfall that is set for young nonwhites in America and, through the grace of God, crawled out the other side."

At one point, Cyril remembers, pressure from the police was making it difficult to even leave the weathered wooden shotgun shack he shared with Aaron on Valence Street. Feeling "disenfranchised and messed-over," Cyril sometimes figured that the only solution was to kill himself and take a chunk of the New Orleans police force along with him.

"I felt like my back was so far against the wall that I couldn't leave my house and walk two blocks without being stopped and hassled by the cops," Cyril says. "But I knew exactly when the shift changes were at this particular police station, and I'd read about how, in the Nam, these people would rig themselves with explosives and walk into this big area of GIs and just explode. And that kinda stuff crossed my mind, you know?"

THERE WAS A LOT RIDING on *Brother's Keeper*, coming as it did on the heels of the breakthrough success of *Yellow Moon*. But it didn't really deliver: *Brother's Keeper* didn't make the Nevilles superstars, or contain any big hits, or introduce them to a whole new audience. Instead, it sold quietly and steadily.

So the Neville Brothers kept working. They toured Europe, then the U.S. with Ronstadt, then did a headlining tour that began last December and is slated to run until October. They made videos for "River of Life" and "Fearless" and recorded a version of Cole Porter's "In the Still of the Night" for the *Red Hot + Blue* AIDS benefit album. Cyril produced the DEFF Generation, a group made up of the *next* generation of Nevilles. (The four brothers have twenty-one children and as many grandchildren between them; Charles even has great-grandchildren.) Art worked with the reunited Meters and recorded four songs for a local album, while Charles cut his own largely instrumental album with a group called Diversity. Meanwhile, Rounder Records released two Meters compilations. An English label put together a collection of recordings by Art and Aaron, *The History of the Nevilles*. Rhino Records released a sequel to its acclaimed anthology, *Treacherous*.

K.N. FOR EDIE BASKIN/ONYX

And then there's Aaron. He won two Grammys with Linda Ronstadt, made television appearances and posed for a Gap ad. And most importantly, he finished *Warm Your Heart*, the first real album he's made since *Tell It Like It Is*. Ronstadt, who coproduced the album, wanted to capture Aaron's voice, his heart, his devout Catholicism and his Louisiana roots, which she did by gathering songs from the likes of Randy Newman, John Hiatt and Allen Toussaint, as well as a version of the Ave Maria. The result showcases Aaron's voice in lush, poppish settings that contrast with the grittier and moodier atmosphere of *Yellow Moon* or *Brother's Keeper*. Aaron loves it. "If you listen to the record," he promises, "you *will* have your heart warmed."

But will the attention Aaron gets from *Warm Your Heart* rub off on his brothers? Probably not: Aaron's audience is likely to be older, more passive and less passionate than the fans of the Neville Brothers' sinuous funk. And in the end, it won't matter. That, it seems, was one of the lessons of *Brother's Keeper*: After decades of hard luck and bad times, it'll take more than an album that peaks at Number Sixty to change their course.

So as their show at Shoreline nears an end, these four men hold to that course. Onstage these days they stick to their standard repertoire: songs from the last two albums, Aaron's solo ballads, covers of Bob Marley's "One Love" and, inexplicably, Stephen Stills's "Love the One You're With" and, with luck, "Hey Pocky Way" or "Brother John" or one of the gems from early Nevilles records. But if the song choices are predictable, the music is infectious, driving and just about undeniable, especially with the help of drummer Willie Green and bassist Tony Hall, who may be the sharpest and funkiest rhythm section on the planet.

At the end of the set they surge into "Brother Jake," a rocking tune about a friend of Aaron's who was on the street, loaded, when he was jumped and killed. It's a cautionary tale about a man who succumbed to the many temptations the Nevilles have spent their lives battling – but it's also in the best tradition of a New Orleans funeral song, which means the dead man is sent to his grave with a party, not a lament.

Aaron's son Ivan, who played a set earlier in the day, has joined his dad and his uncles onstage. "He finally made it," Aaron sings of his errant friend, "back to New Orleans."

"Back to New Orleans," echoes his son.

"Back to New Orleans," echo his brothers.

"WE WAS PUT HERE TO BE TOGETHER, SO WE GONNA BE TOGETHER."

Together, the two generations of Nevilles take Brother Jake home – not so much riding roughshod over the ugly facts of a hard life that ended early, but simply sending an unfortunate brother to his final reward. This is a family that has confronted ugly facts for years and come out on top: After all, these four men can now make good livings as musicians, where for much of the past four decades they couldn't say that. As they sing the song, the Neville Brothers have gained a bit of success and a measure of peace – for themselves, of course, but mostly for family.

"We just wanna keep writing songs, and keep making records, and be heard," says Aaron. "This is our *life*, you know? We just wanna keep living it and pave a way for the ones coming behind us, so it won't be so hard for them." ■