The Neville Brothers' Tribute to 'Scar John'

The quartet's hit, 'Brother John/Iko Iko' is a gumbo of musical influences, including Creole, funk, R&B, doo-wop and girl-group pop. It's also a tribute to a musician friend

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he Neville Brothers, circa 1979. From left to right: Charles, Art, Aaron and Cyril Neville *PHOTO: REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES*

By

On May 2, the Neville Brothers will reunite for the first time since 2012 at New Orleans's Saenger Theatre as part of a tribute concert. Among the quartet's most critically acclaimed songs is "Brother John," recorded first in 1976 and again in 1981, with "Iko Iko" added. Over the years, "Brother John/Iko Iko" has become a Mardi Gras anthem and is culturally linked to the chants of Mardi Gras "Indians."

The Indians date back to the late 1800s, when "tribes" were formed in New Orleans's black neighborhoods to pay homage to Native Americans and create an alternate Carnival celebration. The customized African dress, masks and rituals have been passed down to younger generations over the years.

Like most songs born in New Orleans, "Brother John/Iko Iko" is a gumbo of musical influences, including Creole, funk, R&B, doo-wop and girl-group pop. Recently, the Neville Brothers—Aaron, Art, Charles and Cyril—as well as the Dixie Cups' Barbara Hawkins and arranger Mac Rebennack (also known as Dr. John) talked about the song's evolution. Edited from interviews:

Cyril Neville: From the time I was 6, I always carried with me a paperback dictionary, pencil and paper. My mother insisted I learn to read early, so I wouldn't stumble into death. Down in New Orleans in the '50s, if you drank from the wrong fountain because you couldn't read the sign that said "Whites Only," you could wind up beaten or dead.

In my teens, when I began singing and playing percussion, I'd use my pad to jot down things I heard that sounded interesting for songs. In the case of "Brother John," I wrote the lyrics in the early '70s with my Uncle Jolly [George Landry]. They're set to a song with an African rhythm that was popular with every Mardi Gras Indian tribe then. New Orleans is really the northernmost point of the Caribbean, so the African, island flavor has always been there. James "Sugar Boy" Crawford was first to popularize this rhythm on his 1954 hit "Jock-a-Mo." I wrote "Brother John's" lyrics with my uncle as a tribute to a friend—John "Scarface" Williams—who had been killed a short time earlier.

Aaron Neville: I was close with Scarface when we were teens. He sang with Huey "Piano" Smith and the Clowns in the early 1950s and then with the Tick Tocks—significant R&B groups in New Orleans. Scarface and I hung out a lot at the Dew Drop Inn on LaSalle Street. One night in March 1972, he was stabbed trying to stop a fight in front of a club on Dryades Street. His death was a big blow, not only because he was a well-known musician but also because he was the Big Chief of the Mo Hawk Hunters and a friend of our uncle, Big Chief Jolly, who was chief of his Mardi Gras Indian tribe.

Cyril Neville: As a child, I was always curious about the Mardi Gras Indians. I used to follow Uncle Jolly [George Landry] all over town. Back then, all of the Indian tribes in the city's wards sang the same songs but played the African rhythms differently, giving the songs their own flavor. I learned all the inflections just by tagging along with him.
One day in the early 1970s, I was at my Uncle Jolly's house, where he and four of his friends were sewing their Indian suits for Mardi Gras. I had written some lyric ideas on my pad: "He was a mighty friend with a heart of steel/ Brother John is gone / But he never would bow and he never would kneel / Brother John is gone." My uncle read them and laughed, saying how much he liked what I had done. That was one of the proudest moments of my life.

Art Neville: My three brothers and I were all singers and musicians, but we didn't officially come together as a group until 1976, when we sang back-up harmony on "The Wild Tchoupitoulas"—my Uncle Jolly's album. It was named after his tribe and featured Mardi Gras Indian call-and-response chants. Members of the New Orleans band the Meters were on there, and it was co-produced by Allen Toussaint. That's the first time we recorded Cyril's "Brothe =John."

After that album, we decided to stick together. It felt good. In 1978, we recorded our first album, "The Neville Brothers," for Capitol, which didn't do much. We were without a label for a few years until Bette Midler came down to New Orleans to perform at the Orpheum Theater. After she heard us play at Tipitina's, we spoke and she said she was going to tell Jerry Moss of A&M records about us. She did, and we were signed. Our first album for the label was "Fiyo on the Bayou," released in 1981. We decided to record "Brother John" combined with "Iko Iko," which we had been doing at clubs for years.

Charles Neville: Actually, three of us came together for the first time in New York in the early 1970s, when Cyril and Aaron stayed with me for a while. They had just started playing "Brother John." The three of us rehearsed it in Brooklyn before performing at Catch a Rising Star. The song went over great. There, we met David Forman, a singer-songwriter inspired by Aaron, and Bill Dicey, a harmonica player. So we put together a band.

Aaron Neville: Whenever we performed live in the late '70s, people in the audience liked to dance to "Brother John." To stretch out the groove, we'd add on other artists' hits, like Hank Williams's "Jambalaya" and Hank Ballard and the Midnighters' "Sexy Ways." They all sounded similar and fit right in with our funky Creole thing. Soon we added "Iko Iko," which went over so well we kept the two songs together. "Iko Iko" was credited to Barbara Hawkins and the other two Dixie Cups, and it was a big hit for them in 1965.

Barbara Hawkins: Growing up in New Orleans, my sister Rosa, my cousin Joan Johnson and I learned a street song from our grandmother. We used to call it "Iko Iko." In 1965, we were in New York recording for Red Bird Records. On a break in the studio, the three of us began jamming on the song, probably because we were homesick.

Someone in the control booth liked what we were doing and started recording us without our knowledge. Then he asked us to do it again. We kept jamming with our drumstick, Coke bottle, ashtray and aluminum chair, and that second taping became the vocal for our hit. For publishing purposes, the three of us in the Dixie Cups became the songwriters. After "Iko Iko" came out and was a hit, the company that owned the rights to "Jock-a-Mo" sued on behalf of "Sugar Boy" Crawford, but everything was settled in 1967, giving him part of the royalties. At the time of the recording, we didn't even know his song existed. "Iko Iko's" harmony, flavor and lyrics were distinctly ours.

Charles Neville: We recorded "Brother John/Iko Iko" along with the rest of "Fiyo on the Bayou" at Studio in the Country in Washington Parish, La., a couple of hours north of New Orleans. It was in the middle of nowhere. Food, beverages and everything else were brought in, which kept us from wandering off on breaks. We were so far from town, nobody would drop in and distract us.

Art Neville: I wanted to hook up the song the way we played it on gigs—with a live, party feel. But Joel Dorn, the album's producer, wanted to use the band that backed Mac [Rebennack]. Joel wanted the song and album to be more commercially accessible, which meant a bigger, punchier sound for FM radio and stereo systems. Mac wrote the arrangements.

Using Mac's band was always part of the plan, before we arrived at the studio. Those guys were great. Of course, our band didn't like that they weren't going to record. But when we explained that Joel wanted a different feel, they understood. They were going to have plenty of time to play it on tour once I handed out the arrangement.

Charles Neville: We did a couple of takes of "Brother John/Iko Iko" plus some overdubs. It was mostly straight-ahead playing and recording. The cats in our band had a certain way of playing it, but Herman [Ernest III] from Mac's band had his way of playing the second-line drum with a Mardi Gras groove, and bassist David Barard had a Mardi Gras feel, too. Everyone liked it.

Aaron Neville: I sang high harmony on the recording, while Art and Charles sang the lower notes and Cyril sang the lead. I loved singing the high notes. I'd listen to Art and Charles to make sure we sang the notes together and that I blended in. I was part of the group. That's what has always fascinated me about doo-wop—the harmony and falsetto.

Mac Rebennack: "Scar" John was a special cat. He saved my life one time. We were standing outside the Robin Hood Club listening to Little Miss Cornshucks when he suddenly said, "Look out, man." So I looked out and half a St. Louis brick came sailing past my head. All the Nevilles singing about him was special on that record. But there's also something about that drum that Herman played that put a hurt on that sucker. The Nevilles' singing and Herman's drum always got folks wigglin'. And that's all right.