

New Orleans pianist and singer Dr. John dies at 77

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Dr. John, an immensely talented pianist-singer from the unique New Orleans music scene that emerged prominently in the 1960s and '70s, died on June 6 of heart failure. His career spanned nearly 60 years and underwent many different musical phases. But he is perhaps best known for his early recordings, which spanned a remarkable musical range, from funk-driven pop songs to New Orleans jazz and blues to at least a half-dozen other musical styles and influences, often creatively and seamlessly blended together.

Born Malcolm “Mac” Rebennack Jr. on November 20, 1941, in New Orleans, he grew up in the working class 3rd Ward, the same neighborhood where jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong grew up four decades earlier.

At age 13, through his father’s neighborhood appliance repair shop, he met the flamboyant pianist Professor Longhair (born Henry “Roy” Byrd), known for “Tipitina,” “Go To the Mardi Gras” and “Big Chief,” among many others. Later in life, Rebennack consistently described his exposure to the legendary Professor Longhair’s unique style of New Orleans piano jazz and blues as transformative. The sound carried Caribbean and Afro-Cuban influences, including rumba, mambo and calypso, but was also steeped in the ragtime, zydeco and blues music that developed in the Mississippi Delta region in the first half of the 20th century. The confluence of musical elements was something Rebennack would gravitate toward, champion and master in his career.

Expelled from school in his early teens, he began playing music with intense seriousness thereafter. He demonstrated an early talent for both songwriting and guitar and, by age 16, joined a musicians’ union. He wrote his first studio-released song in 1958 and played in multiple rock and R&B-influenced bands by the late 1950s, mostly as a sideman.

The rich New Orleans rhythm and blues music scene of the 1950s and '60s brought him into contact with many

remarkable musicians, particularly piano players, including Fats Domino, James Booker, Huey “Piano” Smith, the Neville family and dozens of others.

From a very early age, Rebennack was also part of several racially integrated bands and recording studios in Louisiana, even though Jim Crow laws still made it difficult to do so. By every account, he was a very open and giving musician, and much of this comes through in his body of work. He reportedly got into difficulties with the law for hanging out with black musicians.

He struggled with drugs and hard living throughout the first half of his music career. When he was 19, he was shot in his index strumming-finger during a bar fight and lost all sensation—which eventually forced him to shift to primarily playing the piano, an instrument at which he became a master.

Rebennack left the New Orleans music scene to work in Los Angeles in the early 1960s, also as a means of trying to clean himself up. He became a regular session player with the famed “Wrecking Crew,” alongside musicians such as drummer Hal Blaine, guitarists Tommy Tedesco, Leon Russell, Glenn Campbell and many other gifted players.

In 1968 Rebennack invented a musical persona, known as “Dr. John, the Night Tripper” based on a Senegalese-Haitian voodoo medicinal healer. The stage persona of Dr. John was intended to embody the history and sounds of New Orleans’ musical heritage, inflected with some of the emerging “psychedelic” rock production of the late 1960s.

He originally intended someone else to be the singer while he merely produced the music. However, fortunately, his proposed choice of a singer fell through, and Rebennack decided to sing with his undeniably unique, gravelly, Cajun and Creole-inflected style, which became a distinguishing feature.

Much of what defined Rebennack’s career as Dr. John

and the historical musical influences he embodied are contained in his remarkable first album *Gris-Gris* (1968). In some ways, he never surpassed its musical ambition on any other album.

Featuring all original songs, and excellent New Orleans musicians like saxophonist Plas Johnson and composer Harold Battiste, *Gris-Gris* has a genuinely original and almost unique sound. There are at least a dozen styles of music incorporated into the songs—jazz and blues, Caribbean rumba and calypso, psychedelic and funk music, Latin sounds, Cajun and Creole-influenced music, and even baroque and Appalachian music.

Very little of *Gris-Gris*, from start to finish, feels forced or false. While the lyrics are not particularly striking, they often still serve as a memorable vehicle for Rebennack's gritty and at times playful singing. Songs like the up-tempo and melodic *Mama Roux* or the propulsive and dramatic *I Walk On Gilded Splinters* are excellent examples of how soulful and complex Rebennack's objectives were in undertaking the album. When performing live at the time he would often emerge in elaborate costumes and headdress, evoking the *Mardi Gras Indians*—something he continued to do in various ways throughout his career.

He would produce three more albums within the "Voodoo" Dr. John musical persona—*Babylon* (1969), *Remedies* (1970) and *The Sun, Moon & Herbs* (1971)—though none as musically exciting as *Gris-Gris*. However, in the process, he developed a growing following of admirers, particularly among fellow musicians.

In 1972, he put out an album of classic New Orleans cover songs, including Professor Longhair's "Tipitina," James Crawford's "Iko Iko" and the traditional "Stack-A-Lee." The songs featured more prominently his singing and supremely soulful piano playing, as well as his ability to make a song really swing.

Also around this time, Rebennack teamed with the soulful pianist and producer Allen Toussaint, and the exciting New Orleans funk band The Meters, led by organist Art Neville. The result was his most commercially successful album, *In The Right Place* (1973). Featuring the most memorable song of his career, the funk and soul-driven "Right Place, Wrong Time," it was as clean and smooth as it was funky and danceable. Rebennack's thick and confident singing, drawing on Cajun, Creole and R&B influences, is invigorating. The piano-driven "Such a Night," also on the album, is nearly as memorable.

Rebennack, Toussaint and The Meters would produce one more interesting funk-influenced album *Desitively Bonnaroo* (1974), though it was something of a commercial failure. This partnership represented a kind of high-water mark for Rebennack in terms of popular music. In the latter half of the 1970s and 1980s, his recorded output became more uneven and less interesting compared to the intense 1968–74 period.

His abilities as a jazz and blues pianist, however, got even stronger in the latter half of his career. His two albums of piano compositions *Dr. John Plays Mac Rebennack, Vol. 1* (1981) and *The Brightest Smile in Town (Dr. John Plays Mac Rebennack, Vol. 2)* (1983) are patient, exuberant examples of his gifts as a pianist, rich in their fidelity to New Orleans jazz and blues, while putting his own signature on the songs.

His 1992 album *Goin' Back to New Orleans*, consisting largely of covers of the "Great American Songbook," was perhaps his last great album. It includes stirring renditions of songs like "Didn't He Ramble" and "Basin Street Blues, as well as a small allotment of interesting originals, including a return to form of sorts in "Litanie Des Saints."

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, several albums—for instance, *Sippiana Hericane* (2005) and *Locked Down* (2012)—dealt in their own way with the devastation of that event, and the criminal character of the ruling class in response to it. Unfortunately, despite his best efforts, little of the music manages to be truly moving or socially insightful.

In general, Rebennack's strengths usually reflected those of his musical counterparts and his environment, which leaned heavily on the vivacity of the New Orleans music scene. He was a relentless live musician and accompanist, and his ability to move between different styles and forms of music, effortlessly and compellingly, is what made him most fascinating.

He was also at his best when he was "tapping the well," so to speak, of music history. Rebennack's best work, from the 1980s on, were generally interpretations of other musicians, especially the music of New Orleans. He became one of the best-known jazz and blues pianists of the city's music and perhaps its best ambassador to the world after Louis Armstrong.



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