

Section 4

Dr. John

Multiple Grammy Award-winning artist Mac Rebennack, a.k.a. Dr. John, comes by it naturally. Born in 1940 and raised smack-dab in the heart of New Orleans' famed Third Ward, young Malcolm, Jr. was surrounded from day one by music and musicians. Virtually his entire immediate family played one instrument or another and served as inspiration for as long as he can remember.

"My maternal grandfather, who sang and hoofed for a while for the *Al G. Fields Minstrel Show* operating out of Mobile, Alabama, was the one who passed the music on to me in a down way for the first time," Mac recalls in his autobiography, *Under a Hoodoo Moon*. "When he was very old, long after he had turned his last act, he used to sit with me on the front porch and sing the charts he had worked in his day."

Those minstrel- and vaudeville-era tunes may have been the beginning of Mac's music education, but others in his family were equally happy to make their contributions in their own particular ways. "One of the first things I remember about my childhood was a white baby grand Kimball piano in the living room," Mac says. "My sister, who was ten years older than I was, used to practice on it and I was hypnotized..."

That instrument apparently held the same attraction for the rest of the family. It was the centerpiece for many evenings of entertainment and education. "My mother, sister, aunties and uncles all gathered around to play," Mac remembers. "They took turns on the piano and sang together."

Mac's Aunt Andre was his special favorite. She seemed to know every song and was more than willing to pass on her knowledge. "She knew how to play 'Texas Boogie' and took the time to teach it to me," he

recounts. "That was the very first song I learned to play on the piano."

That Mac would remember the event after all these years is remarkable enough...but it's even more amazing put in perspective. It seems Aunt Andre's influence truly rubbed off on him. It's no exaggeration to say that, today, Mac knows literally thousands of tunes, has written countless others, and regularly performs with a list of 120 songs or more at the ready, just in case anybody asks or the spirit moves him. If Mac hears it, he remembers it—and if he can remember it, it's a sure bet he can play it.

Early on, Mac's father helped him cultivate that gift. His dad also liked music, and he happened to own an appliance store. That combination opened the door for Mac to have a unique look inside the rich New Orleans musical scene. "My father used to fix P.A. systems in a lot of the black clubs, and I'd tag along when he did. So I saw early on what was happening. It was at these places that I got my first taste of local acts such as *The Papa Celestin Band*, *Dave Bartholomew*, *The Basin Street Six*, *Professor Longhair*, and a hundred others."

Mac's father also stocked his store with the records of those musicians he liked and saw. When Mac was there, he made sure something was playing on the phonograph; and, over time, he was exposed to much of the best in musical forms as varied as gospel, bebop, jazz, hillbilly, pop, R&B and blues.

Taking a cue from his father, Mac also started a record collection of his own at home. Likewise, he soon developed an eclectic taste that ranged from *Roy Rogers* to *Louie Armstrong* and everybody in between. "Pianists like *Albert Ammons* and *Pete Johnson* made me want to play," Mac remarks. "Their fast boogie—'Roll 'Em Pete' and 'Swanee River Boogie'—excited me and I thought, 'I want to be like that; that's what I want to do.'"

Still, all the exposure had its down side, too. The abundance of great piano players in New Orleans could be intimidating, especially to a young boy just starting

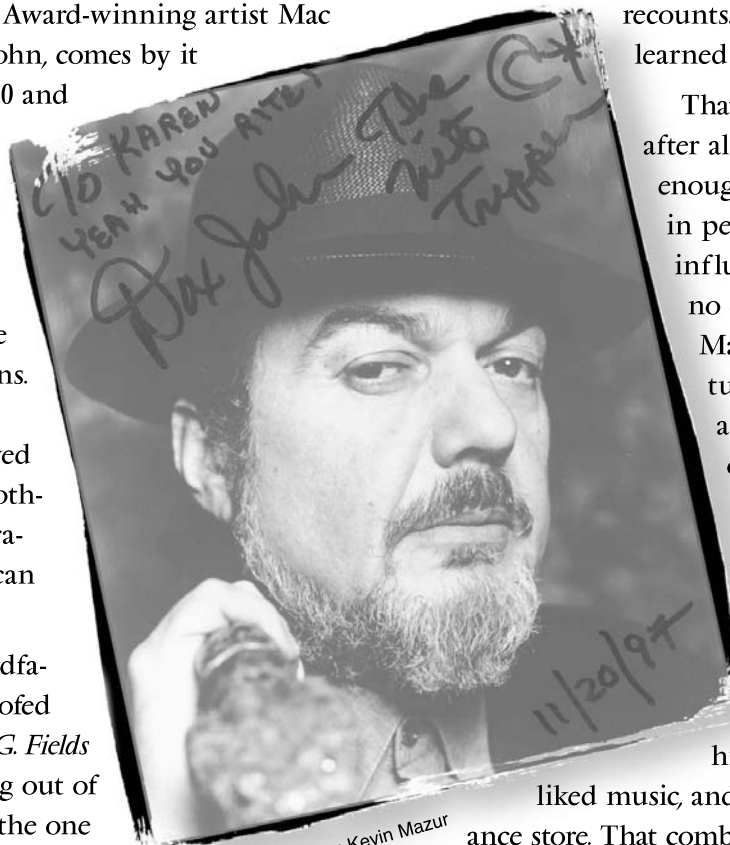





Photo: Kevin Mazur

Dr. John: the New Orleans Style


Play through these ideas to get a feel for Dr. John's style.


1a.  Track 34.1


1b.  Track 34.2



Common slide Common slide Dr. John's slide Dr. John's slide

2a.  Track 34.3

2b.  Track 34.4



Common slide Common slide Dr. John's slide Dr. John's slide

Dr. John's New Orleans style includes many licks with groupings of three or four notes.

3a.  Track 34.5

3b. 



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