

BLOOD BROTHERS

The differences between the four Neville Brothers are as dramatic as the similarities that unite them. The source of the similarities is passionate funk, a feeling for blues-soaked deep pocket grooves that is the basis of their greatness and exalted place in our cultural history.

Art is the oldest. They call him Poppa Funk for a reason. He formed the first band. As both inspired singer and blistering keyboardist, his role models were Fats Domino and Bill Doggett. Art is the Founding Father. He still lives in the same Thirteenth Ward block of Valence Street where he and his siblings were raised in New Orleans.

Charles is a year younger than Art. His religions are bebop and Buddhism. His instrument is the saxophone. At fifteen, he was the first brother to leave home and hit the road, playing with everyone from the Rabbit Foot Minstrels to B.B.King. They called him "The Boy Wonder of Sax." He went to Memphis and returned home with a new stew of blues.

Aaron is a believer, a devout Catholic who worships at the shrine of St. Jude, patron of lost causes. Aaron's vocal aesthetic is downright angelic, an extraordinarily sweet mixture of Gene Autry yodeling and Golden Age gospel crooning. Along with Sam Cooke and Marvin Gaye, he is classified as one of the seminal soul singers.

Cyril is the baby, a generation younger than his big brothers. His attitude is radical - a rougher, tougher blend of balls-out R&B, uncut bayou funk and militant social consciousness. As a writer, percussionist and powerhouse singer, he has made his mark as the most fiery brother and impassioned keeper of the Neville flame.

The story starts in the Fifties.

"In 1954, Art was seventeen and I was six," says Cyril. "That's when Art formed the Hawketts. I think of that line from "Shake, Rattle and Roll" - 'I'm like a one-eyed cat peeping in a sea food store.' That was me, hiding behind the couch, listening to art rehearsing the Hasketts. Man, that was the most exciting thing I'd ever heard in my life."

"The real excitement came when we cut a song called 'Mardi Gras Mambo,'" adds art. "The original version was country style. We funk'd it up and, just like that, it hit big. Fifty years later they're still playing it. Never got paid. But who cared? We had us a record."

Art broke out of the Hawketts, segueing into a brief solo career at

Specialty Records which, like all Neville history, was the product of chance. "By chance," he remembers, "Harold Battiste played me a county song called 'Cha Dooky-Do.'" He asked me to give it a different beat. I did. Then I forgot about it until I was in boot camp and someone said they were playing it night and day in Chicago."

Back in New Orleans in 1960, writer/pianist/producer Allen Touissant brought Aaron to Minit Records. "Over You," written by Touissant, was a local hit. "The label said it never left Louisiana," says Aaron, "but years later when I met the Rolling Stones they said they heard it all over England."

In 1962, Toussaint wrote another song for another Neville - "All These Things," recorded by Art. "While the future was eign played on the radio, "Art remembers, "I was running an elevator at Gaucho's department store on Canal Street."

The Sixties were strange for everyone, especially the Nevilles. In many cases the brothers fought the law and the law won. They moved in and out of hard habits. But in 1966, fortune smiled on Aaron. Or at least half-smiled. "I was digging ditches when this cat told me about this new label, Par-lo," he explains. "I went over to Cosimo's studio, that had more history than Sun Records in Memphis, and cut "Tell It Like It Is." It took off like a rocket. Number-one smash coast to coast. But the label was falling apart, which meant no money for me. The only way to cash in was to tour. Art became my manager and played piano behind me. This was our first time in the national spotlight on the same bill as Otis Redding, the Drifters and the Manhattans. I was pumped but too crazy to handle it all. My mind was a traffic jam."

Overwhelmed by success, Aaron hid out in Florida while, back in the Big Easy, Art formed Art Neville and the Neville Sounds, which, for the first time, put Cyril out front - singing and dancing in the superstar style of James Brown. Aaron joined the Sounds, only to drop out, along with Cyril, to form the Soul Machine. Meanwhile, reconfigured Sounds became the Meters - Art, drummer Joseph Zigaboo Modeliste, bassist George Porter, Jr. and guitarist Leo Nocentelli.

The Meters live on as funk legends. "I modeled the band after Booker T. and the MG's," says Art, "but added some swamp fever of my own." For the next eight years they would record a series of classics - "Cissy Strut," "Look-Ka Py Py," "They All Ask'd For You" - which have achieved immortality. At one point, Cyril became the fifth Meter. But by the mid-Seventies, the four Neville brothers had not still recorded

as a unit.

It took the death of their beloved mother Amelia to change that. "Before she passed," says Art, "she told me, 'keep them boys together.'" Through the unifying power of their mother's brother, Uncle George Landry, who headed a Mardi Gras Indian Tribe as Chief Joy, the inevitable finally happened. Aaron puts it simply: "When Jolly called us together, it was like a call from God." The result was the miraculous The Wild Tchoupitoulas, the landmark project from 1976. That first taste of togetherness led to The Neville Brothers a year later, their debut album on Capitol. From then till now - for twenty-eight productive years - the group has stayed together recording, touring and securing their reputation as first-rank showmen and shamans.

"After our Capitol record," says Aaron, "we went without a deal for a couple of years. Producer Joel Dorn shopped us to a bunch of labels but everyone passed. It wasn't until Bette Midler heard us at Tipitina's in New Orleans and sang our praises that Jerry Moss of A&M paid attention. He let Dord produce our first A&M album, Fiyo On the Bayou, in 1981."

"Fiyo was a heavily Meters-influenced project," adds Art, "with a different twist, Dorn added some New York session musicians to our mix. I also like how he got Cissy Houston and her young daughter Whiter to do background while I sang lead on 'Sitting In Limbo.'"

"Fiyo didn't really sell," says Charles, "which meant we went years with out a deal. Finally, in 1989, A&M decided to take another chance on us. That was Yellow Moon produced by Daniel Lanois."

"Lanois was the baddest outside producer the Nevilles have ever known," states Cyril. "He came to New Orleans and turned a house on St. Charles into a studio. Art brought in a stuffed bobcat, some big ol' rubber snakes and thickets of moss to hand from the ceiling. Lanois had the voodoo vibe going strong; he had psychics dropping by; he let us hang loose; he encouraged using all sorts of sounds - crickets, the whistling wind, you name it - to catch our family flavor. Of the twelve tunes on Yellow Moon, we wrote seven."

"Of the records we made in the Nineties," says Art, "I like Family Groove best. I sang a song called 'On The Other Side Of Paradise' that had an island lilt. 'I get away from city life,' it said, 'leave behind trouble and strife...sweet Lorraine, she's my best friend, she's my

wife.' That's pure autobiography. The brothers are best when we're writing out of our lives."

"The older we've gotten," says Charles, "the more adamant we are about forging our own production and focusing on songs that express our innermost beliefs." Their most recent record, *Walkin' In the Shadow Of Life*, makes that case. "Rivers Of Babylon" and "Walkin' In the Shadow Of Life" are proof positive that in the fourth decade of their creative life the brothers are stronger than ever.

The Nevilles continue to provoke, entertain and excite audiences around the globe. Their similarity/diversity dynamic continues on its paradoxical path. They play together; they play apart. Each of the four brothers pursue projects of their own. Aaron has forged a highly successful solo career. Art tours with an offshoot group he calls the Funky Meter. For years Cyril has led the Uptown All stars. Charles has recorded a series of critically acclaimed jazz records. Yet the heart of the matter is family. Family brings them together. Family keeps them together. Family is everything. Without Family, there is a gaping void. With family, there is the miracle of Neville music, four brothers, bonded by blood, creating some of the funkier sounds this world has ever heard.

-David Ritz