

GETTING NEVILLIZED

an interview with Charles Neville in Cologne on February 22, 2005

Seb: Welcome!

Charles: Thank you!

Seb: I guess you just got here...

Charles: ...oh we've got here yesterday.

Seb: The other day you've played in Coachella?

Charles: Yes.

Seb: And how was your flight ?

Charles: Long but alright.

Seb: I find it quiet bizarre: you arrived in Europe at the same time as the US President.

Charles: He is here?

Seb: He is here but I guess with a different intention.

Charles: Yeah I'm sure! (giggles while saying)

Seb: The title of your album "Walking In the Shadow of Life" made me think of you guys going through hard times these days, I don't know is that right and what does it really mean to you?

Charles: No. Actually it's kind of talking about personal as well as co-hold reality. Art came off with the title. He said he's thinking of the twentythird song that talks about "walk through the valley of shadow and death" and he says we're all really walking in the shadow of life rather than in the light of life and so it was a look at what's happening these days: a lot of the young people in America who are involved in crime and drugs and guns and craziness have put themselves out of the light and into the shadow of life. And like that is the global situation that kind of puts all of us in the shadow.

Seb: It's quiet heavy lyrics this time. That was my impression from the album.

Charles: Yeah well exact because it's speaking to all of those situations.

S: I'd like to go a little bit back. Can you say something about what were your family's other groups before the Neville Brothers?

Charles: When we first started I had a band in the midfifties or early fifties called The Turquoise. Art and I were in that band. Later Art went with a band called the Hawkettes. Aaron was in another band - I can't remember the name right now - and then over a couple of years we all played in The Hawkettes, myself Aaron and Art. We did that for some years and then we split up and went all different ways. In the sixties Cyrille, the youngest one, started performing with The Meters. First he and Aaron were in a band in New Orleans called The Soul Machine and then he went with The Meters and was out on his own and Art was with The Meters and I was living in New York playing BeBop. In 1976 we all went back to

New Orleans to record The Wild Tchoupitoulas with our uncle and that was the beginning. That was when we decided that it's time for us to walk together as a union.

Seb: In the meantime you played with some people like Bobby Bland and even with Johnny Ace. In what time was that?

Charles: That was in fiftyfive, fiftysix, fiftyseven. During that time I played with B.B. King, Bobby Bland, Junior Parker, Big Maybelle, Johnny Ace, Gene Franklin And His Houserockers. (giggles)

Seb: Did they come to New Orleans?

Charles: No, I was on the road. I was travellin` with different bands. Get to this city where I`d like to stay for a while and then broke up with the band and go somewhere else.

Seb: You`ve been growing up on Valence Street in New Orleans. What was the kind of musical atmosphere at the time?

Charles: Uuuh, there was music everywhere all kinds of music! On the radio there was Fats Domino, ya know, all of the Blues artists and Rhythm`n`Blues artists. I heard Bessie Smith and Ma Rainy, Nat King Cole and in New Orleans itself there was the Brass Bands that were playing for all kinds of reasons and there was Guitar Slim and Fats Domino, Huey Smith, Allen Toussaint, James Booker, Professor Longhair, Smiley Lewis, Dave Bartholomeus a lot of music all around.

Seb: So you really couldn`t help but become a musician?

Charles: Right! That was the thing! Yeah!

Seb: Was this kind of encouraged by your parents who were artists too I guess?

Charles: They were not professional performers, no, but they played music and they encouraged us. At the time that was one the few careers that a black person could pursuit in the South that didn`t involve some kind of subserving or involve you with that system. So yeah, they encouraged us to get into that.

Seb: What kind of music did you listen to as a kid?

Charles: Oh, everything! Blues, Gospel, Country, Rhythm`n`Blues, Jazz...

Seb: Is it true that you`re like the "Jazz guy" in The Neville Brothers?

Charles: Yeah.

Seb: You mentioned in an interview that you four persons get from very different kinds of music.

Charles: Oh yeah!

Seb: I mean the way of talking about each other in this book "The Brothers" reveals a big love and respect for each other. Has it always been this way also when some of you guys were more successful and engaged like in The Meters or something? Was there no jealousy no envying each other?

Charles: Oh not for me! I was really happy to see that The Meters were doing something and getting much attention. At that time they were doing it I was livin` in New York and playin` with the Jazz musicians and they were all impressed and a lot of influenced by the music they were doing and I thought that was really great and than of course when Aaron had a hit with "Tell It Like It Is" I was in prison - that first started happening - and so I was happy to see that was going on and he was doing well. (laughs)

Seb: You`ve been in prison? For long?

Charles: Oh I was in for about three years.

Seb: In New York?

Charles: No in Louisiana. In infamous Angola the Louisiana State Penitentiary. Yeah, I was arrested for posession of two marijuhana cigarettes back in the early sixties.

Seb: Three Years!?

Charles: Oh that was sentenced to five years. I had luck enough to get three! (laughs)

Seb: Puuh!! Ohh...äähm...wow. In Louisiana?

Charles: In Louisiana. And at that time, you know, it was luck! There were people and they got 15 years for posession of marijuhana. It was considered to be a very heinous crime at the time. (giggles)

Seb: Alright ... I mean not alright! I can`t really say something about that! You know I got the impression that all of you play an equal part and everything concerning the band or is there some of you a little more dominant in working with The Neville Brothers?

Charles: Well, It depends on what we`re doing. Aaron decides what songs he`s gonna sing, ya know, Cyrille decides what songs he`s gonna sing, Art decides what he`s gonne do and then we kind of talk about it.

Seb: Could you give an explanation of what happens to a cover song that you cover when it gets "nevellized"?

Charles: Oh well the first thing is the quality of the voices - the harmonization of the voices - that adds a special sound and that`s the Neville-sound. Then we try with rythmic reviews. We try to do something with the rhythm that`s kind of identified with us and our New Orleans influence and instrumental it. Just that`s how we play it.

Seb: There`s been a lot of cover songs by The Neville Brothers and even The Meters and they were all very special. You did a couple of cover numbers on "Yellow Moon" like the Sam Cooke song and two numbers of Bob Dylan and it got pretty far from the original. Who does that in the band? I mean who goes so far?

Charles: It really depends on who`s doin` the songs like Aaron did those arrangements of the Bob Dylan songs and also of the Sam Cooke song. Ya know that was the way he felt them at the time. We didn`t sit down and write an arrangement. I play the way that I play and Art plays like he plays and so Aaron said "I wanna do this song" so we just do what we do into it and it makes it come out nevellized.

Seb: The influence of your family on white R'n'B musicians seems pretty obvious but why do you think it was so hard to get a reputation further than being an influence to everybody like the Stones and Rod Stewart and younger musicians even like Wyclef Jean. Do you think it's because of some old racist structure in the music business?

Charles: Somewhat that but also just the structure of the music business the way it is now and the way American radio is organized now. So that getting airplay. Ya know, early on The Meters got a lot of good airplay. When we started as The Neville Brothers we got some airplay but radio was beginning to change and they more talked what they considered commercially appealing or played music that sounded a certain way that they were aiming to certain audiences, the organization that owns the radio stations. So we didn't get the kind of airplay that The Rolling Stones got. Ya know, we didn't get the kind of airplay all the kind of commotion that some of the others got. I think that's just part of the structure of American life and American radio.

Seb: Is it true that The Neville Brothers' first big success was in Europe and not in the U.S. I mean with "Fiyo on the Bayou"?

Charles: Oh yeah, "Fiyo On the Bayou" was much more successful and got more airplay in Europe than it got in the United States. It did get some notice in the States in particular when Keith Richards and those guys said: "Hey wake up, that was the best album that did come up that year!". But it didn't get as much airplay there as it did over here. It wasn't until "Yellow Moon" that we got really powered airplay in the United States.

Seb: Keith Richards he's got a Neville in his band too I guess...

Charles: Oh Ivan was in his band. Ivan is playing with us now too.

Seb: With you now and he is a part of The Expensive Winos I guess.

Charles: Yeah.

Seb: About the time when The Neville Brothers were formed I guess one year before The Meters went on tour with The Stones. Did this open some doors that were closed before, concerning bigger audiences or something like that? I mean The Stones seem to be influenced at that time - massively influenced - by New Orleans sound like on "Black And Blue".

Charles: Yeah, also at that time a lot of successful artists were recording in New Orleans and The Meters were the studio band that was on Labelle and a lot of the really big hip records that came out in that part of the sixties also that helped with their reputation too and to wake up the interest in New Orleans music and influence of New Orleans music on other people. But when we started with The Neville Brothers - I think the first thing we did was The Wild Tchoupitoulas - that was really successful in Europe and Japan a lot more than it was in the States but it did get some good airplay in the States and also after The Wild Tchoupitoulas we did some tours with The Rolling Stones.

Seb: Yeah, The Wild Tchoupitoulas, I mean it was invented by your uncle, Big Chief Jolly was his name, and then I guess you considered to get together and form The Neville Brothers. Was it a kind of Mardi Gras revue or something?

Charles: The music itself was based on some traditionals of Mardi Gras Indians like black people in New Orleans who dressed up as indians on Mardi Gras. A lot of them have native American ancestors. But because of some historical problems with racism in the South Mardi Gras was a white phenomenon and in the black neighborhoods black people did what they wanted to do on Mardi Gras. The Mardi Gras Indians were the first black involved in the

Mardi Gras they got real notice by the white Mardi Gras except by the Zulu Parade. But the music was some traditional music that handed down from the days when the slaves and the native Americans had join forces to help each other and some of the traditions of the Mardi Gras Indians came from there also. And so the songs we recorded as The Wild Tchoupitoulas were just our versions of some of those traditional songs with a couple of new songs that we wrote.

Seb: In his "Chronicles" Bob Dylan witnessed your working on "Yellow Moon" with Daniel Lanois and I think this got him to work with this producer and he even had Cyrille with him in the band. Has it been this way? I think it got him to work with this producer when he witnessed your recordings. Do you still remember about that?

Charles: Yeah, that was the first one of our recordings that was really successful in the United States like it really got a lot of airplay and a lot of notes. At that time Daniel Lanois was really one of the top producers and his idea was not really to try to influence what we do but to work with us and just add whatever little things that he could but he tried to draw out what ever the real essence of our music was and tried to keep it on the recording.

Seb: Did you felt good represented by this kind of producing? I mean you always hear that it's produced by him they all got something in common all these records but I guess he's not taking so much influence on the bands.

Charles: Right. That was his approach. His approach was not to try to really influence the band, just to try to add something to it and try to capture whatever the real essence of the band was on tape.

Seb: So from the late eighties until now you're still working that way?

Charles: Oh, we've had other projects that had other producers who didn't work that way. He was the only one, he understood that and was able to put us on that level.

Seb: Are you constantly touring in the U.S. at the moment?

Charles: We're touring.

Seb: Are working on solo projects?

Charles: Mostly we're touring. When there's time off in between Art does The Meters and The Funky Meters. I've got a Jazz quartett that I work with when we're off the road. Aaron does other projects. I play in Aarons band as well. He does this Jazz shows...

Seb: The Meters are working!?

Charles: There's a Meters reunion at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival this year.

Seb: In the summer?

Charles: It's April. Last weekend in April or first weekend in May. So this is the first one - oh not - I think they did it once before at the Fillmore.

Seb: And Art and Cyrille are with them?

Charles: No. Cyrille is not with the four original guys: Art, Zigaboo, George Porter and Leo Nocentelli.

Seb: Alright. Well, except for your new album "Walking In The Shadow..." what can we expect from your live set tonight?

Charles: Well, of course some of that material and some of those stuff that we've written on for the traditional Neville Brothers music, maybe something from "Yellow Moon" maybe something not recorded maybe a Meters tune or two. Than some kind of jazzy or funky or latin and some Gospel something of what Aaron feels like ...

Seb: Do you have some special sets for everybody in the band?

Charles: We usually make up a setlist just before we go on but than once we get on stage that may change.

Seb: You change the set list every night? Really? You ain't got the whole set before the tour?

Charles: No, for each show we've got a basic set but elements in it may change once we get on stage. Aaron might this add or wants this song or might sings something else. But the songs that we gonna play from the new CD will probably the main songs. Maybe! (giggles)

Seb: Do you have some favorite periods of your own work?

Charles: Yeah, for me ... from the time we did "Yellow Moon" and the first Neville Brothers one that was just titled "Neville Brothers" that's a really great stuff on that one and then I think "Fiyo On the Bayou" was the next one - there is really great stuff on that one and then there was "Uptown" and "Brother's Keeper" and "Live On Planet Earth" and then we had one called "Mitakuye Oyasin" which in Lakota language means "all my relations" and there's some really great stuff on that one. Actually that one was made at Valance Street.

Seb: On Fiyo On the Bayou there was "Hey Pockey Way" The Meters recorded before it was on "Rejuvenation" but it made big change througout the years. Do you still play it live?

Charles: Yeah. And it's not a song that is really separated. Everything is improvized!

Seb: Do you change arrangements on different tourings for different songs like songs from "Yellow Moon"? I heard some live recordings and they all developed througout the years.

Charles: Yeah and it also depends on who's in the band . Now we've got a guitar player Makuni Fukuro from Tokio who's moved to New Orleans and so the stuff that we do on "Yellow Moon" now is different from what was happening in the other years when we had different guitar players. Also Arts Sohn Ian is in the band playing rhythm guitar and this rhythmic we are playing is different, so that changes a little. An basically we still got Willie Green on drums and Nick Daniels on bass but Ivan is playing a Fender Roads and a Clavinet and Art's playing a Hammond B-3 and some other keyboards and pianos. So that all kind of changes the sound and again we play the songs we've recorded how we feel at the time. Ya know, "Yellow Moon" has this kind of set arragement but it's not gonna sound the same and the same with "Hey Pockey Way" it's not gonna sound the same.

Seb: How long do you practice before you go on a tour like this?

Charles: (obviously amused) We don't.

Seb: You don't!?

Charles: No! (breaks into laughing) We had some when Makuni got first in the band. He had to learn the songs and so we had to rehearse. Sometimes Art recalls an old song that we haven't put in ten years and nobody remembers (giggles) so we have to kind of make it up as we go along. (giggles).

Seb: Well, alright, I guess that's it. We're looking forward to see your show. Thanks!

Charles: Oh, the place we're playing in is there dancing? Is there a dancefloor?

Seb: There is a dancefloor. It's no chairs. I guess it holds about 2000 people or something. Do you play with chairs sometimes?

Charles: Oh yeah.

Seb: In America?

Charles: Yeah. When we play theatres. And at some places when there's room people get up to dance on the sides ...

Seb: Hard to get funky!

Charles: ... and at some places when the people get up to dance the security comes up and says: "Oh you gotta sit down!" That's hard.

Seb: Specially in America. Right?

Charles: Yeah.

Seb: You know I've seen a few Rock'n`Roll shows over there. There were people around sitting on tables and having dinner in front of stage. Do you play there too?

Charles: Yeah! We play those too. (giggles)

Seb: I find it really strange. Eating mountains of meat and ... (unfinished sentence because Charles breaks into loud laughs)

Charles: What we've use to do when we played those gigs like the dinner starts early so that by the time we start playing most of the people are finished and get finishing up so that then they get ready and then they start to drink and than we might get some dancing.

Seb: I guess tonight it's about more drinking and dancing.

Charles: Ok.

Seb: Thank you very much Charles!

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