



Jon Cleary

By John Radanovich

Jon Cleary talks about his album *The Bywater Sessions*.



Jon Cleary. Photo by Elsa Hahne / OffBeat

The night Jon Cleary arrived in New Orleans as a teenager, he assumed that he was taking his first steps on American soil—at the Maple Leaf with Earl King on stage. He hadn't really landed in the United States exactly, but instead in the northern musical capital of the Caribbean. For decades he learned from the legends of New Orleans R&B, absorbing the syncopations and swing. "It was a real pleasure playing with bands of guys who invented R&B, like Earl King" he says, but he was also learning the funk buried deep in the delta mud.

Later playing in New York City over an extended period, Cleary also got to see all the salsa greats. "I was able to dive in the deep end of the New York Latin scene. I really loved that piano sound, and was fascinated by it, but it was a style I just didn't understand." He does now. Cleary first visited Cuba in 1992 and has returned often. He recently went to Havana to play for the annual jazz festival and just began writing a substack newsletter about his experiences on the island.

After a lifetime of learning and performing, he is capable of the most deeply satisfying New Orleans funk and R&B and blues, '70s soul, and isn't afraid to throw intoxicating Cuban piano figures into his compositions. Cleary's funk is transcendent, on the same level now as the legendary Meters of the 1960s.



Cleary is fond of saying that funk is the folk music of New Orleans. James Brown may have called out to “Make It Funky” in 1971, but the origin of that lockstep drum and bass wasn’t Augusta, Georgia—it was New Orleans. Lee Dorsey’s recording of the Allen Toussaint composition “Everything I Do Gohn Be Funky (From Now On)” had been released back in 1969, and New Orleans drummers had been funky since long before the 1960s.

Although he had mostly left behind the guitar when he moved to New Orleans, it was a guitar player who taught Cleary the most—the late great Walter “Wolfman” Washington. “I really learned a lot from Walter, those lovely big chord voicings. The timing was really good—it really stretched me.”

Cleary’s new record is one of the most solid and enjoyable funk and R&B albums to come out of the city in recent memory. For his many fans worldwide, this is going to be an instant favorite.

Cleary’s band, the Absolute Monster Gentlemen, are Cornell Williams on bass, Xavier Lynn on guitar, the classically trained Pedro Segundo with all percussion, and Nigel Hall, who adds Hammond organ and vocals (“basically all your favorite soul artists rolled into one.”) All members sing at least backup, but Cleary’s soulful voice has few equals. He plays an electric piano or a Nord Electro keyboard with its many funky sounds, sometimes both at once. Thomas Glass is Cleary’s new drummer, replacing AJ Hall. Depending on the availability of horns for gigs, the band can swell to 10.

For this new record, *The Bywater Sessions*, Aaron Narcisse on tenor, Charlie Halloran on trombone, and Jason Mingledorff on baritone have all the registers covered. A longtime collaborator with Cleary, master trombonist Halloran shares Cleary’s fascination with the music

of the Caribbean. He has been getting lots of his own deserved attention for his latest Tropicales release, the superlative *Jump Up*, with guests Cyrille Aimée and Quiana Lynell.

When Cleary calls out “A-chord, fellas...” to launch “So Damn Good” Cornell Williams leaps forward with a driving gospel bassline under a sharp two-beats-to-the-measure tambourine by Pedro Segundo, with organ fills. The song first appeared on the magnificent 2002 Basin Records Jon Cleary and the Absolute Monster Gentlemen. The new version is already getting lots of airplay in England and around the Gulf Coast. In Cleary’s deft hands this gospel style pays tribute to all the swinging groups backing the uplifting choirs in the Fest gospel tent, and old friends like Jo “Cool” Davis.

With verve and hard swing, Cleary revisits the Meters masterpiece “Just Kissed My Baby” also from his first Basin Street album that kept the modulation and slide from the original (then played by Bonnie Raitt), the “Loose booty!” chorus but no horn parts. This time he adds horn accents to the bass, and some of the time-suspending stops he uses live to tease the dancers. It’s an inventive tour de force of perfect instrumentation and arranging, with the bottom forward in the crisp production sound mix, a Cleary trademark.

“Fessa Longhair Boogaloo” is another of his tributes to Fess, using the structure of “Tipitina” with percussive Cuban-style chording against the layered percussion and drum, and a section of Latin syncopation. The horns quote “Baby Let Me Hold Your Hand” before a percussion break, and then perfectly executed piano montunos.

A more subtly Afro-Caribbean influence appears with the structure of the naughty and sly “Pickle for a Tickle,” borrowing from the obscure 1949 Perez Prado “Habana” that combined a danzon with a mambo. Cleary pairs a kind of a languid junker’s blues with a fast middle of music from both sides of Hispaniola, then returns to the blues. One sexual metaphor after another and the mix of music would seem to be a very appropriate song for next year’s carnival season.

“Zulu Coconuts” is a Mardi Gras song with all the right elements to get itself added to the Carnival classics, with a few Fess chording touches and raunchy lyrics that lend themselves to being yelled downtown (though not G rated for Uptown parades). Let’s hope it gets added to the canon.