



DR. JOHN
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artist bio

DR. JOHN

When a BBC interviewer recently asked Dr. John, “What is the secret to musical longevity?” the legendary New Orleans artist had a ready answer. “Living,” he replied. Through more than half a century of music making, Mac Rebennack Jr. has been doing just that as he’s rolled with the highs and lows that come with being a working musician, and these days he finds himself in an extended stretch of being in the right place at the right time. Now 65, this American icon, whom fellow legend Jerry Wexler once described as “the blackest white man I know,” continues to take all that life has to offer, crisscrossing the country and spanning the globe with his band of virtuosic veterans, the Lower 911, and recording whenever the spirit moves him, which is frequently. More than ever, it seems, Dr. John’s head is brimming with ideas.

The latest one, which comes to glorious fruition on the Blue Note album **Mercenary**, came from his daughter Tina, who pointed out that “Personality,” a 1946 hit for Johnny Mercer, would be a perfect fit for her dad’s down-home style. In fact, Tina suggested, why not do a whole album of songs written or popularized this giant of American popular music? That got Mac thinking. Mercer was a fellow Southerner and workaholic—the Savannah-born artist wrote the words, music or both to a good 1,500 songs, a remarkable number of them classics, as well as spending decades as a performer. He could relate.

“Personality” was one Mercer-associated standard the great man didn’t write himself, although the wry Jimmy Van Heusen lyric was a perfect fit for Mercer’s knowing vocal style. “I just loved the way Johnny sold that song,” Mac says. “It was so much out of the old burlesque thing, and you could tell he knew that stuff, and he always appeared to me to have that Southern something about him. He just hit the lines in songs that was like the real McGillicuddy. He was a great singer, a great A&R man, a producer, and he even started Capitol Records. So we started looking at some Mercer stuff.”

After running the idea past Blue Note and getting an enthusiastic response, Dr. John got down to business, poring over Mercer’s massive songbook. “I wanted to pull as many of the ones that people weren’t as familiar with, but it was impossible,” he says. “One thing about Johnny Mercer’s stuff is that even the songs that aren’t that well known are well known from *something*.” Rebennack had a handful of songs in mind from the start, including “Blues in the Night,” “Lazy Bones,” “That Old Black Magic,” “Save the Bones for Henry Jones” and “Tangerine,” and he looked forward to seeing what would go down when Mercer’s perpetually hip material made contact with his own brand of N’Awlins funk—or *fonk*, as he calls it. As usual, he demo’d up the tunes he’d chosen for his band. “They get what I’m thinking about from that, and then they play it for real,” he says.

Sure enough, a chemical reaction immediately occurred in the studio whenever the players—guitarist John Fohl, bassist David Barard and drummer Herman Ernest III—locked in on their leader’s line through a given song, sometimes completing the thought, at other times refracting it in provocative ways. Pretty much every track on **Mercenary** is a first or second take, and in some cases, “We hit it and quit it, and we were on the next song,” says Mac. “My band, when they lay this stuff down, it’s kickin’. They ain’t flapping in the wind.” Most of the horn parts, from the likes of trumpeter Charlie Miller, tenor sax man Herbert Hardisty and other renowned Crescent City veterans, were cut in subsequent overdub sessions.

Meanwhile, Dr. John was reading Mercer’s autobiography, giving him further insights as well as deepening the sense of kinship he felt with the artist. “Dream,” for example, “is a song that Johnny Mercer wrote the words and the music to that is not like Johnny Mercer’s music,” Rebennack points out. “I like it because it doesn’t really fit. That’s why I think of him as a mercenary—he was a hustler; he knew how to survive out

there. He always wanted to write Broadway shows, but because he wasn't from New York, they wouldn't let him get in the clique. So the next best thing he could make a hustle out of doing was to go to Hollywood and write songs for movies; he had some success doing that. But it was always kind of sliding on a Tin Pan Alley guy's coattails, whether it was Harold Arlen or, later, Henry Mancini. I love going from 'I'm an Old Cow Hand' into 'Dream' on the record, because that's what a real hustler of a songwriter can do—he can dream up some stuff and write a song quick. I do this—and appreciate Johnny Mercer for being able to do that.”

What Rebennack *didn't* want to do was anything obvious. On “Dream,” he was determined that it not “sound like your regulation VFW hall geriatric-squad dance,” while he wanted to take the ubiquitous “Moon River” “to the Johnny Mercer area,” he says. “Henry Mancini wrote the hell out of the changes on that, and I used to love the Jerry Butler version, and I was just trying to keep it way away from all of that.” Mac says he had no intention of covering “Moon River” until he discovered that an eight-bar intro he'd composed for another song fit beautifully into the middle of the Mancini-Mercer standard, so he went for it. “That just shows you how the accidentalness of this record transpired,” he points out. “We just cut the thing, and it feels real organic.”

One of the biggest challenges Dr. John faced was coming up with an original that would both sum up the album's personality and sit comfortably among his interpretations of Mercer's songs. “My tribute to Johnny Mercer,” he says, “is ‘I Ain't No Johnny Mercer,’ which I ain't. But I took a lot of words from a lot of his songs that I would have never thought to use. I never in my life would've thought to use a word like ‘apoplexy’ in a song. I took some lines from ‘Pardon My Southern Accent’ and messed that up, too. Even took my favorite word he used in ‘Moon River’—‘my huckleberry friend.’” But what I tried to do was take some Johnny Mercerisms, and just do them the way I would do them to make a little riff *at* Johnny, *with* him and *about* myself. I figured if I'm coppin' on Johnny Mercer, I might as well cop on myself while I'm doing it. I may not be as good of a mercenary as Johnny Mercer was, but, whatever way you wanna break it down, I'm a mercenary in my own right.”

Mercenary was recorded at New Orleans' Piety Street Studio in the spring of 2005, a few months before Hurricane Katrina hit. The facility, located in the Bywater (once referred to by locals as the Upper Ninth Ward), escaped serious damage, and it's back in business now. Despite these and other pockets of activity, says Rebennack, “Every time I go back, I get weirded out by how little or nothing is going on. Sippiana Hericane [an EP he recorded and released last fall in response to the devastation of Katrina] was a labor of shock. This record was a regulation recording, and I hope it'll do something in some way to help New Orleans .” Sippiana Hericane was released on Blue Note Records November 2005, with all proceeds from CD sales divided equally between three charities—New Orleans Musicians Clinic, the Jazz Foundation of America and the Voice of the Wetlands.

Ultimately, then, Mercenary honors not only the great American songwriter/performer whose music provides its content but also the great American city in which it was created. Every note played by Dr. John and his fellow musicians is the sound of living New Orleans. May they keep on keepin' on.

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ARTIST PHOTO

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