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BATISTE

'Reservoir of Positivity'

BY ALLEN MORRISON

PHOTOS BY JIMMY & DENA KATZ



On a Tuesday afternoon in early December, the pianist and bandleader Jon Batiste sat behind his Steinway grand on the stage of New York's Ed Sullivan Theater. The famously chilly auditorium was empty except for a couple of dozen staff members of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. Batiste's band, Stay Human, augmented by a handful of guest musicians, surrounded him as they began to rehearse. Activity swirled around him. It was less than three hours to showtime, but the show's young musical director seemed unruffled, even serene, smiling and joking with band members.

The operative word was "loose." An impromptu rhythm jam began, during which Batiste stood up and enthusiastically beat out time on his own bass drum, strategically positioned to his left. When the jam subsided, he sat down again and played a series of three stately, open chords that soon morphed into Bruce Hornsby's "The Way It Is," as a trumpeter joined in. Another U-turn, and now the band was playing a different three-chord epic, R.E.M.'s "It's The End Of The World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine)." This was the song they were



Jon Batiste appears on *The Music Of John Lewis*, an album by the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. Blue Engine will release the album in March.

there to rehearse and record for a comic opening segment to be broadcast later in the week. Soon the other musicians joined in, and the jazz-oriented unit was delivering the high-octane, alt-rock anthem with conviction.

At 3:10 p.m., as the band played, Colbert arrived, suited up for the evening's taping, which would begin at 5:30. When the song eventually aired on Thursday night's show, it was re-titled "It's The End Of The Year As We Know It." Colbert, backed by Stay Human's tracks, would race through updated, semi-apocalyptic lyrics about the newsworthy events of 2016, with R.E.M. lead singer Michael Stipe serving as a comedic (and nearly silent) duet partner.

When Tuesday's rehearsal ended, just as Colbert turned toward his desk on stage right, the band started to play the song again, but this time at a languid tempo, in cool-jazz mode, with boppish asides. Colbert pivoted, a look of mock alarm on his face. "What?!" he shrieked.

Colbert has said he regards what Batiste and the band do as a kind of magic that's beyond his ken, and this little moment suggested his continual surprise and joy at their alchemical abilities. For Batiste, it spoke to the spirit of *play* with which he approaches his job, shape-shifting from one genre of music to another. Batiste chooses a different musical theme for every show. It might be New Orleans funk one night, Bach or Debussy on another; Beatles tunes, or music from a specific decade. Whatever the theme, Batiste and his band perform with an unflinching sense of joy approaching euphoria, in the process spreading the idea that jazz is not forbidding or only for the cognoscenti, but fun and for everybody.

Batiste, 30, has reached the pinnacle of

American show business for a musician by becoming Colbert's sidekick and musical director. At the same time, he is pursuing his own unique vision as a musician and composer with a personal, inclusive concept of what jazz has been and what it still can be.

"You can hear the whole history of jazz piano" in his playing, said pianist and NEA Jazz Master Kenny Barron, who taught Batiste at The Juilliard School. "But also, he's a great entertainer. He seems to have found his sweet spot at *The Late Show*."

Bassist and bandleader Christian McBride noticed Batiste in 2004 when the teenage piano prodigy—whom he still calls Jonathan—came through the Jazz Aspen Snowmass summer program, for which McBride served as artistic director. (Today they both serve as co-artistic directors of the National Jazz Museum in Harlem.) Years later, when Batiste joined trumpeter Roy Hargrove's band, McBride thought it was a great fit. "I knew he was going to have some great training that was really steeped in tradition," McBride said. "The fact that Roy liked Jonathan enough to take him on the road already let me know that the great things I heard in Jonathan's playing were real."

Batiste has been doing an "amazing" job as musical director on *The Late Show*, McBride said. "If you look at Colbert's comedy, and you look at Jon's level of musicianship, as far as I'm concerned, they're at the same level."

Despite his youth, Batiste has paid some dues, cutting his teeth as a sideman for Hargrove, Wynton Marsalis, Abbey Lincoln and Cassandra Wilson, among others, before leading his own groups. Prior to forming Stay Human, he fronted his own piano trio for seven

years with bandmates bassist Phil Kuehn and drummer Joe Saylor, both of whom he had met at Juilliard.

In 2011, after Kuehn had decided to leave the trio and New York, Batiste's response was to create a group with an entirely different concept. Stay Human, with Saylor on drums, Eddie Barbash on alto saxophone and Ibanda Ruhumbika on tuba, became famous for leading New Orleans-style second-line processions through the streets and subways of New York (and later at jazz festivals). Batiste likes to call them "love riots." A key to the band's mobility is Batiste's use of a customized melodica, which he calls a "harmonaboard," and the substitution of tuba for double bass.

His rising fame over the last decade in the New York jazz community, and several appearances on the HBO New Orleans-themed series *Treme*, led to a fateful guest appearance on *The Colbert Report* in July 2014.

"We have a natural chemistry," Batiste reminisced in his office above the Ed Sullivan Theater, which is large enough to house a grand piano and a drum set. "And I realized that at the same moment that he did, which was on *The Colbert Report*. He interviewed me in character—his ultra-right-wing character, which is very much the opposite of how Colbert is. That was the first time we ever spoke to each other.

"So he's interviewing me in character and asking these absurd questions. At one point in the interview I tell him, 'I like to improvise as a musician. And I see you have these cards here. As jazz musicians we don't need cue cards to converse with music.' And he throws the cards away and gets within five inches of my face, and he doesn't break eye contact. And we went into a



kind of performance-art thing, where I'm playing my harmonica and talking to him; he's talking to me and saying things that aren't even questions. It just flowed. Later, he joined our musical performance and started to dance. We went out into the street and did a procession. After that, it was evident there was something there, and I was invited back to the show."

They kept in touch. When Colbert was offered *The Late Show* gig, he called his friend Jon. "We had a brief phone conversation," Batiste recalled. "Later we met to talk about his concept for the show. He talked about the history of late night and his favorite shows ... but he didn't give me musical direction, not before [the show began], or *since*, actually. It's been very open for us to create. I had the sense that he trusted me to take care of the music, and I've found that to be true."

"That Jon is a brilliant musician is self-evident," Colbert said via email. "But if you listen closely to his playing you can also hear the man I've gotten to know—a bottomless reservoir of positivity, reaching for a closer relationship with the audience. He can read a crowd like nobody I know and is always ready to lift the room with his music and give me the energy and opportunity I need to connect with 500 people immediately and millions of people remotely."

Colbert instructed Batiste just to follow his instincts, musically. "That's the beauty of hiring somebody that you trust," Batiste said. "Stephen has a full plate on his end of the spectrum—producing, writing, being the main performer, host and interviewer. Imagine all the different things that go into those roles. You don't want to have to think about producing the music ... on the show every night. He wanted

someone who was aligned with his values and vision. He thought that I was the guy; and I felt the same way. There was no conversation about how we might compare to other [late-night] shows. It was more about finding a whole new energy that works, and figuring out a way to put that into the machine of late-night television. I think we found the energy."

Only once does Batiste remember asking Colbert for his reaction to some musical decisions he made. It happened during the first two weeks of the show's existence. "I was wondering what he thought about the [musical] 'bummers' we had played that night. And he said they were great ... He said something like, 'That's *your* lane. You know it more than I ever could.'" Batiste hasn't asked him since.

Considering his public image as an outgoing entertainer, Batiste's early albums, including *Times In New Orleans* and *Jazz Is Now*, are surprisingly low-key and earnest affairs showcasing his formidable skills as a post-bop pianist, as well as his efforts to integrate historical jazz—including Scott Joplin's "The Entertainer," for instance—into the modern jazz vernacular. His current "looseness" onstage and on Stay Human's 2013 album, *Social Music*, is in contrast to his rigorous preparation for his current gig through years of classical and jazz study.

That preparation included exposure from an early age to serious musicians who became mentors. For one thing, he is a product of one of New Orleans' most famous musical families. At first he was a percussionist, playing the conga drum onstage with The Batiste Brothers Band at age 8, and jamming with his cousins,

who were junior band members. When he was 11, his mother suggested he switch to the piano.

Growing up in Kenner, the New Orleans suburb that is also the home of the Marsalis family, he spent years under the tutelage of a classical piano teacher in nearby Metairie named Shirley Herstein. As he continued his classical studies, he played pop music and, increasingly, jazz, both with the Batiste Brothers and outside the family. He began to investigate jazz at 14, an informal process of finding like-minded peers and mentors, including his distant cousin, Alvin Batiste (1932–2007), the clarinetist and educator who served as jazz director at the New Orleans Center for The Creative Arts, which young Jonathan attended.

"Alvin was my mentor from the time I started playing jazz until I went to New York City at 17. He taught me to understand the difference between something that is 'correct,' versus something that is 'right,' if you catch the vernacular."

Warming to the subject, he explained the difference. "Something is 'correct' if it follows the rules and is, quantifiably, the right thing to do in a given situation. But something that's 'right' doesn't have to be correct. Because if it's right, it's *right*. You feel it—you know when something is right. If it doesn't match up to the 'correct' way, it doesn't matter, if it's *right*."

Batiste also cited the influence of saxophonist Edward "Kidd" Jordan and trumpeter Clyde Kerr Jr., who taught alongside Alvin at the Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong Summer Jazz Camp at Loyola University in New Orleans. "Those three were like the village elders. I learned from all of them."

The young pianist was molded as much by

New York as he was by New Orleans. He had several reasons for coming to the big city: “One was to be on the scene and to form my own band here. Another was so that I could meet, and perform with, some of the musicians whose recordings I had heard in New Orleans, and who I knew lived in New York, like Roy Hargrove.” He recalled that, during his first year at Juilliard, he found himself “almost stalking” Hargrove at the Blue Note and at master classes he gave. “The first time I met him, I snuck into his master class at The New School without an ID, and I ran up to the stage and figured out a way to play with him. I was so excited.” Eventually he accomplished his goal: playing in Hargrove’s band.

The other main reason Batiste came to New York was to study with Barron, who until recently taught at Juilliard. “Alvin Batiste introduced him to me. Kenny appeared on Alvin’s [1993] album *Late*, one of his only major label releases under his own name. He told me how this piano player would come into the studio and was the consummate professional, someone at the highest level of artistry. I started checking out his recordings, like *Live At Maybeck Recital Hall*. That one was a big influence. When I saw that he taught at Juilliard, that was a no-brainer for me.”

Batiste studied with Barron for six years, right up till he left Juilliard with a master’s degree. His weekly lessons with Barron consisted of teacher and pupil playing duets in a room with two grand pianos. “I would walk in early in the morning, 9 or 10, and another player would be walking out, shaking his head in wonder, almost sulking, as if Kenny had just wiped the floor with them. They were like, ‘Man, I just don’t know how I’m ever going to reach that level.’

“So I walk in, he doesn’t say a word. He just starts playing a tune. And either you know it, or you learn it in the course of playing it. One of the pillars of his tutelage was to learn as many songs as you possibly can remember. Then you’ll be able to play songs that you’ve never heard before with greater ease. Most songs operate from the same kind of progressions. If you know a wide body of them, then you’ll understand the logic of how they work together—simple as that. The more you know, the more you *can* know.

“He also stressed the importance of swinging your eighth notes ... even just with your right hand. And learning how to play them continuously and never stop swinging. We’d work on the same song for 30 minutes, trading off lines with only one hand, keeping the swing going, to get a good solid-feeling eighth note. And that is the essence of jazz.”

Batiste also cited the influence of Monk, Duke Ellington (as a pianist), Harry Connick Jr., Marcus Roberts, Eric Lewis (who now goes by the name ELEW) and the New Orleans



piano masters Henry Butler and James Booker.

Occasionally Batiste would become *too* fixated on the style of one of his role models, such as Monk or Booker: “I would have to stop listening to them, to get them out of my head,” he explained. He also cited the critical influence of a non-pianist: Wynton Marsalis. “As Wynton always says, all jazz is modern. He turned me onto the concept that the older styles of jazz can be made modern.”

Batiste never really stopped being a “serious” jazz pianist, but his ideas grew to incorporate an expansive kind of music that embraces current and historical styles and tries to expand the audience for jazz, a concept he calls “social music.”

“In 2011,” he said, “I graduated from Juilliard, and I felt I had evolved from being an apprentice to so many great musicians; I was confident enough to be a leader. As a band leader, the concept I wanted to drive home was bringing people together—people who wouldn’t be in the same room together if it weren’t for the music.

“That’s the philosophical concept. The musical concept is what I call ‘Jazz 2.0.’” With the Internet helping people to connect instantly and create one global culture, he explained, “we have music that is about the moment. Jazz is the most of-the-moment, modern style of music that there ever was. What’s more modern than ‘right this second’? I’m creating it right in front of you. So, ‘social music’ is about accommodating all of the [musical] influences that are in your world, and making your own

unique blend.”

In the years following Juilliard, Batiste became an increasingly popular draw at jazz festivals, where his energetic performances would draw both hardcore jazz fans as well as those who were new to the music.

Batiste’s joyful onstage persona, on display on national TV every night, is part of his message. Far from being a shtick, it reflects his true personality: “Just as Louis Armstrong did, as Dizzy Gillespie and Ellington did ... your stage persona gives people another entry point to the music. If you have a charismatic personality, people can find ways to relate to the music through you. It has to be authentic, though.”

Thanks to Batiste, *The Late Show* has featured more jazz artists than is common on late-night TV. “We’ve already had Roy Haynes on, Arturo Sandoval, Wayne Shorter, Jimmy and Tootie Heath,” he said. “But we’re doing it in a way that aligns with the greater vision of the show, which is about not just jazz, but the world and current events—and jazz is represented in that, for once.”

Batiste thinks that the cumulative effect of having a jazz band like Stay Human on the show every night over years “will impact the jazz community in ways that we can’t even imagine. I think our era is just becoming aware enough, and interested enough, for jazz to make a resurgence, but in the modern context. The jazz community is too segmented and too insular. We need to embrace the world around us—those who are fans of the music but don’t know it yet.”

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