

FEST FOCUS

Friday, April 28, 12:40 p.m. BellSouth WWOZ Jazz Tent

Jonathan Batiste

“It’s always exciting to know that you’re on the Jazz Fest line-up,” says jazz pianist Jonathan Batiste, “to know that you have something to contribute to such a large musical event.”

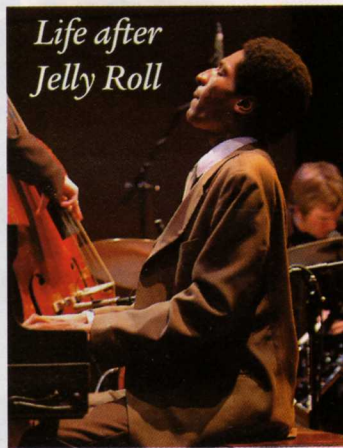
Batiste is only 19-years-old, but he’s already a Jazz Fest veteran. For years, he played with the Batiste Brothers Band, his family band, and last year, he led his own group for the first time. This year, when he returns with his trio, the young pianist will no doubt contribute more innovation and maturity than many a musician who is already drawing Social Security.

Batiste started singing and playing percussion at 8 and at 11, he began formal piano lessons. It wasn’t until he attended the Louis Armstrong Summer Jazz Camp a few years later that he first heard real jazz.

“First they played Thelonious Monk’s ‘Straight No Chaser,’ but at the time I wasn’t hip enough to understand it,” Batiste says. “Then I heard Jelly Roll Morton, which was closer to the New Orleans thing. And I was like, wow, that’s what jazz is.”

In high school, he honed his skills at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA), the same program that produced Terence Blanchard, Harry Connick, Jr. and Wynton and Branford Marsalis. “NOCCA was a completely different experience for me in terms of being around younger musicians that were just as talented and were trying to do the same thing, which was to get better as a musician,” Batiste says.

Times in New Orleans, Batiste’s first album, was an attempt to capture “the happy, almost party-like atmosphere of the city,” he modestly claims. Although he was a 17-year-old high school student at the time, Batiste played and wrote on *Times in New Orleans* like a musician that has absorbed the entire jazz canon. The arrangement of “Misunderstood” echoes Dave Holland’s Big Band. The majestic piano work of “Township” owes a debt to Abdullah Ibrahim.



Life after
Jelly Roll

And, in an audacious move, Batiste reworks Monk’s “Straight No Chaser,” the same tune that confounded him as a child, into a striking arrangement that’s equal parts bluesy improvisation and Matthew Shipp’s hard-edged modernism.

Batiste is now a sophomore at Juilliard. He calls Juilliard “a continuation of NOCCA, just on a larger scale.” New York also offers new opportunities. The legendary singer Abbey Lincoln, for example, recently recruited Batiste for her band. This summer, he will tour Europe with Lincoln.

In the two years since he recorded *Times in New Orleans*, Batiste has matured as an artist. His primary influences are now the great figures of jazz — Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Monk. He is also suspicious of contemporary jazz’s emphasis on individual performers over groups. The top clubs, like the Blue Note in New York, would rather pull together a collection of all-star performers than book a working band. “In the long run, I think that’s going to hurt the music,” Batiste says, “because nobody’s really going to develop anything beyond a strong, individual voice.”

Batiste focuses his creative energy on his trio with bassist Philip Kuehn and drummer Joe Saylor, two young musicians from Pittsburgh. The group plays twice a month at Sweet Rhythm, formerly

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the legendary Greenwich Village club Sweet Basil. The trio’s first recording, *Live in New York*, will be available at Jazz Fest.

Young jazz musicians, Batiste believes, must ensure the music’s survival. “I always say that the older generation has all the knowledge but doesn’t have the answers,” he says, “all we can do is take the knowledge from them and come up with the answers.” He sees institutions dedicated to jazz, such as Wynton Marsalis’ Jazz at Lincoln Center, as part of the answer, and feels it’s the responsibility of young jazz players to get rid of old stereotypes. “I mean the stereotypes about jazz musicians being uneducated, uninformed about society and unable to live in society,” Batiste says.

Younger jazz musicians should also stop chasing a mass audience. “Jazz was part of popular culture in the past, but it’s never going to be part of popular culture again,” Batiste says, and contends that integrating pop music into jazz only dilutes the music and drives away older audiences. “If they want to hear a hip-hop groove,” he says, “then no matter how well you play it with a band, the real hip-hop, the real popular culture, will always be a better alternative.”

New Orleans jazz musicians now have an additional burden. “It’s really complicated since Hurricane Katrina,” Batiste says. “You have a responsibility to keep the cultural significance of New Orleans music alive wherever you go. If you don’t keep it alive, there’s a good chance that it won’t be perpetuated to the next generation.”

