

NEW ORLEANS

SOUTHERN
FOLK ART
AT NOMA

ALL GUMBOS
GREAT AND
SMALL

SHOPPING
FOR FINE
LEATHER

IVAN NEVILLE'S
LOCAL
FAVORITES:
FOOD, MUSIC,
NIGHTLIFE

Where

BECAUSE YOU'VE ARRIVED

BAND OF BROTHERS

The Nevilles

New Orleans' first family
of music on their bond to
the city...and to one another

November 2004

MAPS
+ LISTINGS



BAND of BROTHERS

For the Nevilles, New Orleans' ambassadors of music, it's family and community that fires their creativity

BY JIL McINTOSH

All eyes were on the Crescent City in September as Hurricane Ivan threatened—and none more than those of the first family of New Orleans funk, the Neville Brothers.

On tour in New Mexico to promote their new album, *Walkin' in the Shadow of Life*, they waited anxiously for news as their families were evacuated, and then breathed a sigh of relief as the storm turned and left the city largely unscathed. For three things matter most to the four brothers and their extended family: their beloved hometown of New Orleans, their music, and the unbreakable ties that bind this talented family together.

Born into a family with music and dance in its blood—their mother Amelia and her brother George were a dance team—Arthur, Charles, Aaron, and Cyril followed individual paths that crisscrossed on various projects before officially uniting as the Neville Brothers in 1977.

"We'd talked about it over the years, and my uncle George wanted to do something with Mardi Gras Indian music [a Carnival custom of dressing in elaborate Native American costumes] and he asked us to do rhythm," says Aaron Neville. "He called us all down to do this album, *Wild Tchoupitoulas* (1976), and it was just so natural to be singing and playing together. My uncle told me it was something our parents had always wanted to see, and so we started the band up, and that's how it began."

They followed *Wild Tchoupitoulas* with 1977's *Neville Brothers*; there were 13 more albums, culminating with 1999's *Uptown Rulin'*. In 2001, eldest brother Art initiated a project that would again involve everyone, including the younger generation: his son Ian, Aaron's sons Ivan, Jason, and Aaron Jr., and Cyril's son Omari.

Art had undergone serious back surgery that could have resulted in paralysis, and it was on his mind. "I thought of the 23rd Psalm, about how you walk through the valley of the shadow of death," he says—and so the album was titled *Walkin' In The Shadow Of Life*. Released to critical acclaim last month, and featuring the hit single "Ball of Confusion," it's a return to the band's funk roots.

Music can be recorded just about anywhere, but there's no place like home. The Nevilles opened their own studio on Canal Street, whimsically named Neville Neville Land, so they could control the product and work at their own pace. "It's turning out to be something real fine," Art says. "You don't have to look over your shoulder, counting the clock time. We took a year to do this album."

The location also goes beyond artistic freedom: New Orleans is the heart and soul of the Neville Brothers. There's the tight-knit community where they grew up, surrounded by their extended family. "All of our older folks lived and died here in New Orleans, and we want to stay here," Art says. "I still live across the street from where I was born." There's the gospel music they first heard as children in church. There's the sound that spills out of clubs, and open windows, and streetcorners throughout the city.

And there's the unique blend of music that exists only here. "It's a melting pot of all different kinds," Aaron says.

From left: Cyril, Charles, Aaron, and Art Neville
Photo courtesy T.A.R.

"It's a mixture of Caribbean, zydeco, and jazz. There's Professor Longhair, and Dr. John. The Mardi Gras Indians bring something to the plate. When you die, there's a band to send you off. And we've been hearing it all our lives. You've got a gumbo here, all mixed together, with music from the cradle to the grave."

The modest brothers downplay the fact that they are an integral part of that blend, but they've been helping to shape it for 50 years now. In 1954, at age 17, Art recorded a song called "Mardi Gras Mambo" with his high school band the Hawketts; it is still considered the unofficial anthem of Carnival. In 1966, Aaron scored a huge pop hit with "Tell It Like It Is." And in 1967, Art formed Art Neville and the Sounds, with Aaron and Charles on vocals. The group was a local club success that later became The Meters.

Even after the Neville Brothers was officially formed, the four would often go in different directions. Aaron proved the most successful; after a dry spell following his 1960s hits, his career revived with a 1989 duet with Linda Ronstadt, and a follow-up string of albums that netted him four Grammy awards. *(continued on page 18)*

5 DECADES OF THE NEVILLES

1954

"Mardi Gras Mambo" (The Hawketts)

Art Neville sang lead on this R&B tribute to Carnival, which is still played all over the Crescent City during Mardi Gras.

1966

"Tell It Like It Is" (Aaron Neville)

Aaron Neville was 25 when he recorded his first big national hit, which got a second life on the soundtrack to the film *The Big Easy*.

1976

"Hey Pocky Way" (Wild Tchoupitoulas)

Mardi Gras Indian classic, with the Meters on instruments and the not-yet-official Neville Brothers providing vocals.

1989

"Don't Know Much" (Aaron Neville & Linda Ronstadt)

This sentimental ballad was an international hit that spent five weeks at #1 in the United States.

1990

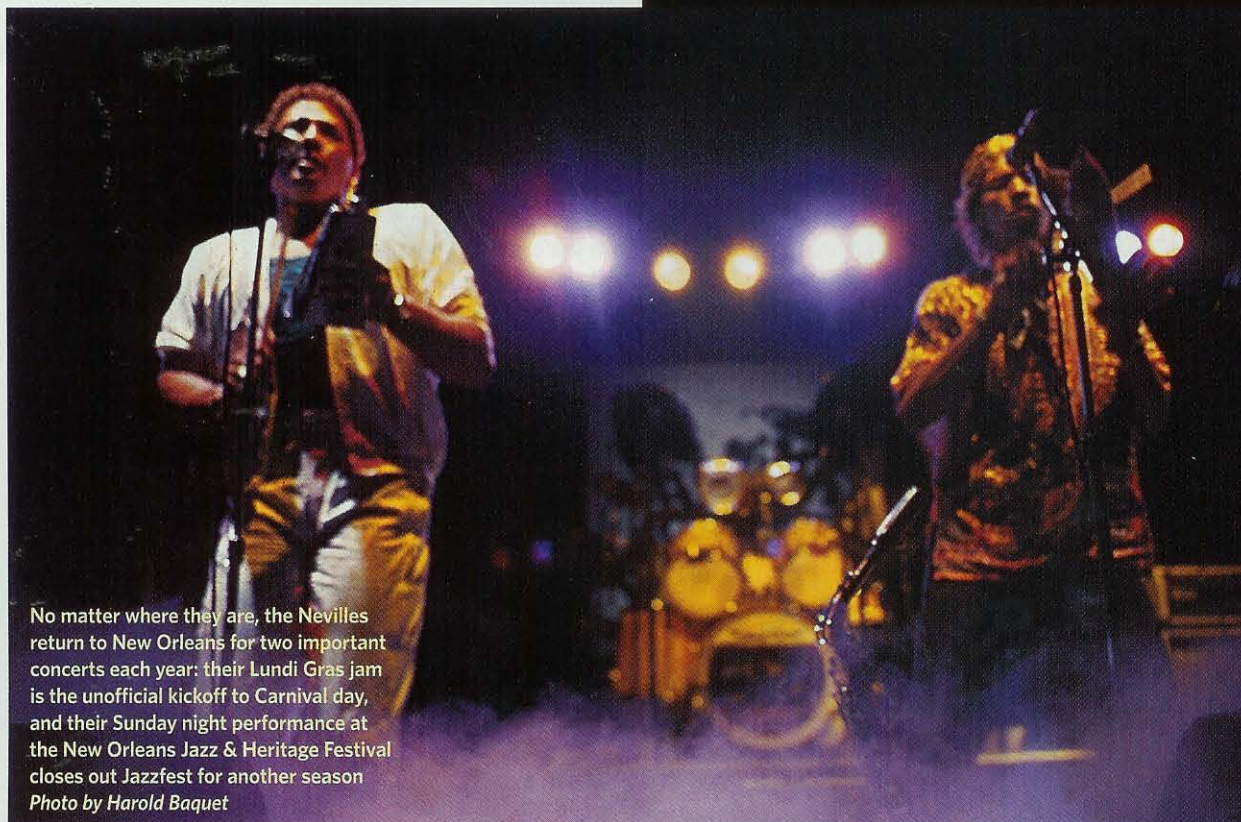
"Bird on a Wire" (Neville Brothers)

Aaron's vocals, applied to Leonard Cohen's lyrics, were eventually used in the Mel Gibson film of the same name.

2004

"Ball of Confusion" (Neville Brothers)

The Nevilles' remake of the Temptations hit was released this fall and is currently receiving radio play.



No matter where they are, the Nevilles return to New Orleans for two important concerts each year: their Lundi Gras jam is the unofficial kickoff to Carnival day, and their Sunday night performance at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival closes out Jazzfest for another season
Photo by Harold Baquet

But while solo careers have torn many other show-business families apart, they strengthen the Nevilles: each individual success is considered favorable publicity for all.

"There's no jealousy," Art says. "Aaron's thing with Linda Ronstadt put us on the map. All this great stuff has helped us out. Everybody's doing their own project, but the Neville Brothers is the mothership. It all comes back to that."

The tradition continues with the singing career of Charles' daughter Charmaine, a fixture on the New Orleans club scene, and Art's daughter Arthel, the journalist and TV personality who's the new cohort of the syndicated *Good Day Live*. "And there's my beautiful daughter Amelia, who's eight," Art says. "She plays piano and sings all the time. The whole family is blessed."

Indeed, one of the most moving songs on the new album is "Brothers," developed from a poem Aaron wrote about their love for each other, their devotion to their parents, and the inspiration they hope to be to their own children.

The brothers spend much of their time on the road, and are currently touring to promote *Shadow*. But no matter where they are, their hearts are at home. Their annual Lundi Gras concert is a kickoff for Fat Tuesday celebrations, and they take great pride in the honor of closing the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival each spring.

"We've given our lives to the city with our music," Art says. "We talk and sing about New Orleans everywhere we go. When we're in Australia, or Europe, or Asia, we're ambassadors for New Orleans."

"Everybody in New Orleans is blessed people. When we're away, we think about coming home. Like the song says, 'Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans? We know.'" **W**

NEVILLELAND

Ivan Neville spends much of his time in California, and he knows what it means to miss New Orleans. So, whenever he's in town, he immediately heads for his favorite music and food:

"My first stop is **Tipitina's** (501 Napoleon Ave.) for music. There are great local bands, and numerous ones from outside New Orleans as well. In the French Quarter, I'll bring a friend over to **House of Blues** (225 Decatur St.) and see what's going on. And there's always good music at the **Maple Leaf** (8316 Oak St.); that's where I go Uptown.

"Right next to the Maple Leaf there's **Jacques-Imo's** (8324 Oak St); it's my favorite place. They hook me up with fried chicken wings, and they have this deep-fried roast beef po' boy. Lots of good stuff there.

"For breakfast I go to **Mother's** (401 Poydras St.), and I just order the big breakfast, with grits, eggs, and bacon or maybe sausage.

"Late at night, for winding down, I go Uptown to **Monkey Hill** (6100 Magazine St.). There's a great pool table, and you play for free. It's quiet there, with couches, and you can sit down and chill. And real late at night I go to **La Peniche** (1940 Dauphine St.), because they've got this waffle with peanut butter, bananas, and pecans on it.

"Sometimes I go to this place for lunch when I want to indulge in something I shouldn't eat—a place called the **Red Eye Grill** (852 S. Peters St.). It's right next to **Howlin' Wolf** (828 S. Peters St.) which is a great place for music. They make this great hot sausage po' boy. It'll close up your arteries. Enjoy it while you can, because you might not live that long afterwards!"