

Transmogrificational:
Malcolm Rebennack
becomes Dr. John The
Night-tripper, circa 1968.



A dense collage of voodoo-related items including skulls, bones, religious icons, and a jukebox. The background is a wooden surface covered with various objects: a large skull with horns at the top left, a jukebox with a record sleeve for 'DR. JOHN, the night tripper GRIS-gris' at the bottom center, a large skull with a black headband at the bottom right, and numerous smaller items like bones, religious medals, and a skull with a black headband. The text is overlaid on this collage.

BEWITCHED, BOTHERED & BEWILDERED

MAC REBENACK'S REGENERATION INTO VOODOO SHAMAN **DR. JOHN** CONJURED MUSIC OF TIMELESS SPOOK, BUT NOT WITHOUT COST – TO HIS SANITY AND SIDEMEN. NOW, WITH THE BLACK KEYS' **DAN AUERBACH** UNDER HIS HEX, HE'S REVISITING THE ZONE OF HIS CLASSIC GRIS-GRIS – MINUS THE SMACK AND THE PSYCH WARDS – TO REKINDLE HIS MUSICAL SWAMP FIRE. "WE WERE DOING SPIRITUAL THINGS," HE TELLS MOJO'S **BOB MEHR**. PORTRAIT BY **RAPHAEL**.

T

HE GUIDING STAR SPIRITUALIST Church in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward is unlike any most orthodox worshippers will ever witness. Inside, the walls mix both the familiar and the more exotic talismans of faith: Christian iconography, elaborate oil lamp displays, and a shrine to the Native American warrior Black Hawk, whose visage looms from the altar. A reverend mother guides the proceed-

ings, ministering to her flock, soothing their spirits with songs and sermons, healing their bodies with folk medicines made of roots and herbs gathered in the nearby woods and swamps.

Into this strange world steps a young guitarist, still mourning his father's recent death and in the salad days of a relationship with opiates that will continue for the best part of four decades. He has been sent by his music teachers to play for the congregation, but what he finds is more than just another gig.

"It was a true church, 'cos it was open for anybody of any religion," recalls Mac Rebennack, looking out on the fairytale spires of the French Quarter's Jackson Square as he puffs on a Dominican cigarillo. "There would be Hindus and Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Masons, even Voodoos all in this church. All those things were all represented in that one place. Seeing that, it not only turned me out, it turned me on, it turned me in — it turned me every which way. The spiritualness of the church was so different. And they might play any kind of music too. There would be people sitting in with the band coming from every kind of place, playing every kind of thing.

"Truthfully," says Rebennack of this near 50-year-old encounter. "That's where Dr. John was born."

BUT REBENNAK'S TRANSFORMATION INTO A FEATHER-decked ambassador for New Orleans' music and culture, the larger-than-life alter ego who made his name and drove him all but mad, was all in the future. Through the '50s, the young guitarist had grown into a hotshot Crescent City session man but by the mid-'60s he'd fallen on hard times. While on the road with his band earlier in the decade, he'd had a finger on his fretting hand shot and mangled during a post-gig mêlée. Soon, he found himself caught in an escalating cycle of junk and jail.

"Between 1963 and '65 I was pretty much in a lockdown situation," says Rebennack. "I was playing for some [prison] church services, but that was about it."

After his release, Rebennack no longer felt welcome in a New Orleans whose DA, Jim Garrison, had declared war on the city's night culture, so he decided to try his luck in Los Angeles, where his sister was living. Here he



Under a Crescent City moon: an early Mac Rebennack publicity shot, circa 1956; (left) the astounding Dr. John 1968 debut, *Gris-Gris*; (below) Mac on a session in 1968.

found session work through an exile contingent of New Orleans cats led by arranger Harold Battiste Jr, who'd come west to work with Sam Cooke and found chart success with Phil Spector and Sonny And Cher.

"Mac's mother called to let me know he was coming out to California and put me on the look-out for him," says Battiste, now aged 80. "I realised that he could be an asset. It would be a good thing to get Mac into a position where I could work him into the session deal."

But Rebennack found Hollywood day work unsatisfying. "I played on so many weird sessions out there. It was in the early days of psychedelic records, and it was strange, man," he says. "I remember Marcell Richards coming out there, a keyboard player I grew up with. He was playing on a Buffalo Springfield record. They said, 'Play some of that New Orleans shit you do.' He said, 'Well, I'll play some New Orleans shit as soon as y'all play some New Orleans shit,'" says Rebennack, laughing. "We'd already gotten paid, so I didn't feel too bad about him getting us fired off the date."

DRIVING TO AND FROM SESSIONS ALONG LA'S FREE-ways, a homesick Rebennack began to crystallise an idea that had come to him back in New Orleans, a concept for a kind of musical mystic: Dr. John, The Night Tripper. He'd read about a similarly-named 19th-century Louisiana medicine man, root doctor and charm maker of Senegalese descent who'd been busted running a voodoo operation with a woman who may have been a distant relative of Rebennack's. Mac's character would be a visual feast of Indian feathers, ju-ju sticks and shrunken heads; musically it would be a merger of second line funk, eerie incantations and the wildly disparate sounds he'd absorbed in the Spiritualist Church.

In short, it would be an evocation of the New Orleans where, "you can't separate nothing from nothing. Everything mingles each into the other — Catholic saint worship with gris-gris spirits, evangelical tent meetings with spiritual church ceremonies — until nothing is purely itself but becomes part of one funky gumbo," as the Dr. would note.

Rebennack originally wanted his friend, the singer Ronnie Barren — who'd been working a similar hoodoo-hippy character called the Reverend Ether — to take on the Dr. John role, but Barren's management told him to stay away from the project. Finally, Battiste and Rebennack's run-



© Jim Marshall Photography LLC, Andy Cahlan, Porter News Service/Historic New Orleans Collection, Getty Images



Big chief: Dr. John, backstage in San Francisco in the early '70s. The shrunken head next to him is real; (inset) Harold Battiste (right) with Sonny And Cher.

"IT'S HARD FOR ME TO LOOK BACK. I'VE BEEN AWAY FROM A LIFE OF DRUGS FOR 22 YEARS."



ning buddy, conga player Richard 'Didymus' Washington, convinced Mac to take the lead himself.

"They said, 'Well, if Sonny And Cheryl and Bob Dylan can sing, you could do that too,'" says Rebennack. "The thing is, I never liked frontmen. I really didn't like frontmen on any level. I just always had something against them. I mean, I liked Joe Tex and I liked Marvin Gaye and Big Joe Turner, too – but that's three guys out of about a million. So I never wanted to be one. But I figured I'd give it a try."

In the fall of '67, Battiste secured studio time for Rebennack at Gold Star Studios, and they assembled a crew of New Orleans ex-pats for the sessions that would yield Dr. John's debut: *Gris-Gris*. Didymus was joined by drummer John Boudreaux, saxman Plas Johnson, Jessie 'Ooh Poo Pah Doo' Hill on tambourine, Ernest McLean on mandolin, and a group of girl singers, including Shirley Goodman (of Shirley & Lee fame) and Tami Lynn.

"Almost everybody on that record was from New Orleans, or had lived here," says Rebennack. "We were cutting a record, but we were doing spiritual things that were connected to what our roots were." Even so, they were careful not to profane the more sacred aspects of voodoo culture. "I had some concerns, but I was close to the [voodoo] Reverend Mothers. They said, 'Don't make it authen-

tic, just revamp lyrics and revamp things.' So that's what we did."

Gris-Gris' seven tracks would play seamlessly as a nocturnal dream-scape, fuelled by tribal percussion, booming bass, and ethereal voices speaking in tongues – a hypnotic quality indebted to Battiste's deft arrangements. Even today, the LP's startling, much-covered centerpiece, *I Walk On Guilted Splinters*, has the power to spook. "I knew what to do and what not to do to let the spirit flow in the feeling of the music, rather than try and write it all out," says the producer today.

The album was done and Battiste had secured a release on Atlantic's Atco imprint, but Rebennack was unsure what its fate would be after being chastised by label-head Ahmet Ertegun. "Ahmet cussed me out at a Bobby Darin session. He was like, 'You boogaloo motherfucker – what's the record you giving me?'" just on and on," remembers Rebennack. "I'm thinking, Ahmet, you really must hate me and my record. I figured it wasn't even coming out with the president of the company going off on it so bad. Tell the truth, I was kinda shocked when it did."

RELEASED AT THE DAWN OF 1968, *GRIS-GRIS* EMERGED into a rapidly changing world – an America that was tuning in, dropping out and getting in touch with its own burgeoning freakiness. Rebennack and his motley crew – now including the ➤

The right place, er, right time: enjoying the fruits of success, August 1975; (inset below) managers Brian Stone (left) and Charlie Green.



"AHMET CUSSED ME OUT: 'YOU BOOGALOO MOTHERFUCKER - WHAT'S THE RECORD YOU GIVING ME?'"

◀ mysterious singer-dancer Kalinda, who inspired *Gris-Gris*' serpentine Danse Kalinda Ba Doom, and kitted out in outrageous Mardi Gras plumage – were happy to expand their minds further.

"We played a couple gigs at Love-Ins or Be-Ins or Whatever-The-Hell-Ins," recalls Rebennack. "The [hippy] crowd liked the fact that we put on a show. Me and the girls would come through the audience, go up on the stage, then I would disappear from their view in a puff of smoke. There wasn't no bands doing none of that stuff then. So we stuck out."

In Middle America, however, the freak show's street voodoo theatrics did not play so well. "We kept adding things to the show as we went along," says Rebennack. "But in St. Louis, one of the guys in the band got busted for lewd and lascivious behaviour and cruelty to animals – 'cos he bit the head off a chicken and threw the body to a snake no one could see. Meantimes, Kalinda was dancing naked with body paint on. So we got two busts in one gig."

It was at this point that Brian Stone and Charlie Green – two Hollywood hustlers who'd had a piece of Sonny And Cher and Buffalo Springfield – entered the picture. They bailed out the band after the St. Louis debacle, and with Rebennack on the hook, installed themselves as his management. Meanwhile, as *Gris-Gris* built into an underground hit, Rebennack returned to the studio to make a second album, *Babylon*, as friction grew between him and Battiste, who was beginning to see Dr. John as a commercial acid-rock antithero.

"Harold had an idea in his head that this could be like a Jimi Hendrix thing," says Rebennack. "I didn't see that happening. I felt

like Jimi's doing what he does, I'm gonna do what I do."

Recorded in the wake of the turbulence of 1968, *Babylon* had an off-kilter vibe amped up by Battiste's enthusiasm for unusual time signatures, and reflected the socio-political upheavals of the time. "It was more of a political sermon that the Doctor was gonna give them," says Battiste, of songs like *The Patriotic Flag Waver* and the title track. "The arrangements, the whole album, was based around deeper thoughts, rather than just some rock'n'roll or dance thing."

Babylon's unusual atmospheres were enhanced with a little help from composer and musical inventor Harry Partch. "We used a lot of Harry's original instruments," says Rebennack. "We had a few little things of his on *Gris-Gris*. But we had a lot of them on *Babylon*, great things that Harry used to make for cartoons and movies and shit. We even had a gong from him. On the record there's this big gong roll that sounds like an explosion 'cos we slowed down the tape."

Despite the creative success of *Babylon*, the Rebennack/Battiste alliance was disintegrating, and the pair would eventually fall out over credit for the entire Dr. John project, plus a related production deal with Mercury. In a 1971 *Cream* interview, Battiste painted himself as Rebennack's nursemaid and Mac as, "a hopeless drug addict, entirely irresponsible. They'll give

money to him, knowing I'm the one who'll be doing the work."

"Mac's problem with his habit... was that other people would give him a lot more drugs and dope," argues Battiste today. "That sorta got in the way of us."

"We had our own ways of disagreeing about things back then..." says Rebennack coolly, "and I guess we still do."



FORGING AHEAD WITHOUT BATTISTE, REBENNACK recorded a third album, *Remedies*, in 1969. Produced by Tom Dowd, it was a somewhat lacking affair, not helped by the fact that most of the original *Gris-Gris/Babylon* band had freaked out on acid or fallen by the wayside. In the midst of the sessions, his new management persuaded the junk-addled Mac to commit himself to the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Centre, during which time, as Rebennack tells it, there emerged plans to have him declared incompetent. Not so mad after all, Mac escaped from the hospital and laid low in Miami for a time. Meanwhile, *Remedies* was released unfinished.

The following year, he took Dr. John to the UK to perform, where the act was wildly received. "When I got to England I was treated like a Sheikh of Araby or something. I really couldn't figure any of it out," says Rebennack, who was joined by London's rock royalty – including Mick Jagger and Eric Clapton – for sessions at Trident Studios.

However, things had changed within his band. Most of his original backing players, "couldn't get out of the state, much less the country,"

he recalls. "Then someone on that tour ripped off this whole winery we were staying at, all this expensive plug, and got us into a lot of shit at the Montreux festival. The whole thing was a bad situation."

The harried period in the UK continued in the studio, with Rebennack completing the first quartet of Dr. John albums with *The Sun, Moon & Herbs*. "Everything was confusional on those sessions," he says. "There was tape running constantly, there was all these songs."

Originally planned as a triple record, Stone and Green commandeered the production and began chopping up the album – Rebennack fired them, and was eventually able to salvage a satisfactory single disc version of the record. He's recently been revisiting the original tapes from *The Sun...* sessions, with an eye towards putting out an expanded multi-disc reissue next year.

The record would bring a crashing end to the first phase of Dr. John's career. He retreated slowly from the all-consuming aspects of his alter ego to eventually find a middle ground, as well as some chart success, in the early 1970s with the *Gumbo* and *In The Right Place* albums.

Reflecting on the *Gris-Gris* era today, Rebennack admits much of his recollection is coloured by years of heroin use. "Thing is, I was tore down all that time. So, looking back at the period... it's hard for me to look back," he says, suddenly turning serious. "I've schooled myself into looking forward. I've been away from a life of drugs for 22 years. My life is way different now. I don't take any credit for it. I feel like I got good people around me who care. And that's what matters in this world. All the rest of this shit, it falls into some grim abyss."

FEBRUARY, 2012: IT'S A WARM, WET winter's evening in New Orleans. The 71-year-old Rebennack – all heavy-lidded charm and Big Easy bonhomie – is sitting on the patio of our Jackson Square lookout luxuriating in the sounds of the city: the bells of a nearby church, a far off drumline rehearsing. The reverie is broken only by a passing car blaring Coldplay's *Yellow*, of all things.

Despite his conflicted feelings about his *Gris-Gris* period, it has remained an aural touchstone for successive generations of musicians. "There's so much on those records," says The Black Keys' Dan Auerbach. "You put them on and you're just transported. Mac was way ahead of his time combining all that percussion, the beat poetry and the conceptual elements like no one had done before."

In 2010, Auerbach reached out to Rebennack with a plan to recapture some of that magic, and offered to produce a Dr. John album at his Nashville studio with a handpicked band of young players.

"We talked for hours on end about the sound of those early Dr. John records," says Auerbach. "That was kind of a blueprint, sonically, for what we wanted to do."

The resulting album, *Locked Down*, is a testament both to Rebennack's continued potency as a musician and Auerbach's thorough understanding of the quicksilver elements that conspired to make the Dr. John *oeuvre* so effective.

For Mac, the project has given him a new sense of his own past, as well as fresh hope for the future. "Working on this record, I thought, Wow, this is very spiritually correct," he says, casting his mind back to his Spiritualist Church epiphany and taking a final puff of his cheroot.

"And, you know, all I ever wanted was to be spiritually correct."

Locked & LOADED

The Black Keys' DAN AUERBACH found the man behind Dr. JOHN on new album *Locked Down*.

I HAD been a fan of Mac's for a long time,

especially of those first few Dr. John records: *Gris-Gris* and *Babylon* are my favourites. I reached out to Mac and his manager saying I was interested in making a record. I didn't know where his head was at; I went into it completely blind. I flew down to New Orleans for a few days. I played him a bunch of music and gave him my ideas for a record. He showed me some lyric sheets he had. That was the initial meeting and it went really well. He gave me a big hug when I left and said, "I'll see you in the studio."

The musicians I chose for the record he'd never played with. He was taking a big risk, going way out of his comfort zone, working in my studio [in Nashville] with a bunch of young kids he'd never met before.

Mac is used to the classic way of writing a song where you come up with the melody and lyrics and you add your track to that. We did the exact opposite. We came up with the

music first – spent nine days in the studio with the musicians, all live on the floor, coming up with parts, Mac included. After nine days we had 13 songs done. He came back a month later, spent eight days finishing songs – lyrics, vocals, melody. We got the girls to come in and sing back-up vocals once we had Mac's leads in place.

One of the main things was I didn't want him playing piano; I wanted him on keyboards that were a little funkier, a little bit strange.

When I first visited him in New Orleans I was playing him these weird old soul 45s and Ethiopian funk from the '70s, and he was really digging it. On a lot of that stuff the keyboards are kinda

cheap. So I wanted him playing a Farfisa to keep it weird. He sat down behind the Farfisa and said, "I haven't played one of these since 1969 with Doug Sahm!" But [on] the song *Revolution* he does an amazing Farfisa solo in the Egyptian scale or whatever – that was the first take, a one-take solo! He was so on top of his game. He realised that everyone around him were really great musicians and it felt like something special and so he rose to the occasion.

Making the record, I came to find that there are a few

different Macs. If he doesn't know you he can be distant. He did that when I first talked to him. He was giving me a lot of thick New Orleans accent and slang, it was hard to understand him. I realised it was all a defence mechanism. He's been kicked around a lot over the years, so he's leery of people. But after he got comfortable and happy with the music we were making, he was all smiles. He showed a lot of love to the guys in the group, opened up and started to tell us stories.

I love Mac; he's a hero and a legend. But when you're in the studio with someone like that, you can't necessarily treat him that way. You gotta be real critical and push them. I couldn't sit around and have stars in my eyes. I challenged him on the lyrics. I suggested he write a song about his kids, about not being around for them growing up. That was something he's never come close to addressing in a song.

Mac's first records are so great, there's all the really cool imagery, but it's all a character; it's not Mac, it's Dr. John. I really wanted this album to have the feel of those records, mixed with Mac, the man. He was willing to put himself out there like that, and talk about personal stuff. At the end of the day, I feel that's what's gonna stand the test of time, 'cos he's totally speaking from the heart.

As told to Bob Mehr



Organised: Dan Auerbach (left) with Dr. John on keyboards.

"I CAME TO FIND THAT THERE ARE A FEW DIFFERENT MACS."



Dr. John And The Funky Bunch, June 12 at Bonaroo 2011, Manchester, Tennessee.

