

Presents

JON CLEARY

Cleary, born in England, is an adopted son of the Crescent City, who's made good his citizenship with five soul-soaked R&B funk albums with the Absolute Monster Gentlemen. As a session man, he's played with Taj Mahal, B.B. King and Bonnie Raitt, to name a few, and is a longstanding member of Raitt's touring band. Musically, though, his heart and soul reside on the banks of the Mississippi.

QUOTES:

"Jon Cleary is the ninth wonder in the world."

- Bonnie Raitt

"Cleary can be an absolute monster on his own, but Cleary's full combo R&B is as broad, deep and roiling as the Mississippi river, the combined swinging product of local keyboard tradition, Cleary's vocal-songwriting flair for moody Seventies soul and the spunky-Meters roll of his Gentlemen."

- David Fricke "Pin Your Spin" Review Rolling Stone - April 21, 2004

"I haven't heard anybody close to having absorbed so much funk and so many subtleties of the different genius piano players and guitar players and rhythms of New Orleans."

- Jazziz Magazine 2002

Cleary plays piano as if he's revving up an engine and sings as if a line drawing of his behatted self were next to "soul" in Webster's.

- The Washington Post June 15, 2005 -- Pamela Murray Winters

Sydney Morning Herald
March 26, 2008 By Adam Fulton

How did British piano player Jon Cleary come to be a hero in New Orleans?

Pop stardom and its associated froth has never seemed important to Jon Cleary. His fascination has been the musical life and riches of old New Orleans, where big characters and inspired playing swirled with legend during endless late nights in smoky haunts near the Mississippi River.

"[Music] is a soundtrack to your life in New Orleans – – it's part of the social fabric," Cleary says. "There are so many bands and so many musicians."

The story of how the British piano player and singer has come to be one of the American city's leading names of funk winds from the English county of Kent, where Cleary grew up hearing vintage records from New Orleans and building dreams around them, to that "crescent city" in Louisiana, where he came to rub shoulders with its old masters – his heroes – and eventually become regarded as part of their bloodline.

Cleary tours regularly with blues royal Bonnie Raitt, has worked with Taj Mahal, B. B. King and Ryan Adams as a session man and is soon to record with John Scofield. He has also put out five funk- and soul-drenched albums of his own, three of them with his dynamite band of New Orleans-born players, the Absolute Monster Gentlemen.

But it turns out that Cleary – on a return trip to Australia after feverish responses to the band's shows five months ago – was initially a guitarist who fell into playing the ivories by accident.

It all goes back to his childhood in a highly musical family. One travelling uncle "used to send me letters from New Orleans and came back with suitcases full of 45s, which he'd then insist I listen to and he'd point out little details", he says.

Cleary's love affair was ignited. "At the age of eight or nine I thought, 'That's what I want to do when I grow up: I'm gonna go to New Orleans.' "

As soon as he was old enough to leave school, he did. With little money, the guitarist found a flight that was free in exchange for the use of his luggage space.

"I didn't have a guitar when I arrived and the house I moved into had a piano," he says. "I had to play something and I couldn't afford to buy a guitar so I just played what I had access to. So, accidentally almost, I became a piano player.

"I've never told anybody that before."

Cleary was dazzled by the music masters suddenly nearby in the "wild, pirate city", home to piano trailblazers Fats Domino and Professor Longhair. Roosevelt Sykes "was hanging out at my local", he says. James Booker "was at the bar all the time". The Neville Brothers "would play across the street". "Stevie Ray Vaughan would play literally yards from my front door to like three or four people ... and it wasn't a big deal at all. That was just normal. That's what I really dug about it. I was gobsmacked every time."

Cleary later began "hustling" gigs and making his name. Being English mattered little to the musical fraternity. "If anybody alluded to it, it normally wasn't the musicians. They didn't really care. The only thing important was if you could groove."

Cleary had found home. "I went there with enough money to stay there for just a week ... and I'm still there 30 years later."

The bandleader's funk and R&B is steeped in New Orleans styles and drips with parade beats, dancing piano and rich grooves under his tangy voice. But it isn't heard much in the crescent city today. He tours most of the year. "It'd be nice to actually just come off the road and stay at home for a little while and write and record. That's my favourite thing to do," the well-spoken Cleary says as he relaxes at a Sydney hotel, his oft-seen black hat nowhere in sight.

The "Monster Gents" have bonded with Sydney during several trips. "We feel like we're part of the family, almost. We have some of the musicians here from Sydney come and stay in our houses and stuff when they come to New Orleans."

Such is the affinity that the band recorded their new, live album, *Mo Hippa*, at the Vanguard in Newtown during a typically sizzling show last year.

"The audiences here seem to be very hip to what we do," Cleary says. "They get it."

<http://www.joncleary.com>