

Things Happen That Way
Liner Notes by Ken Ehrlich

When the good folks at Rounder sent me a copy of THINGS HAPPEN THAT WAY, Mac Rebennack's last recorded studio album, there was one overwhelming reminiscence that swept over me as I listened to it for the first time. I was taken back to one April JazzFest evening where Mac finally gave in to my (undoubtedly extremely annoying) request to give me a piano lesson and agreed to try and teach me how to play something—anything—in his style.

I can remember going to a house in the Quarter and being led to a piano bench—actually half a bench, Mac was on the other half, or slightly more than half—and hearing that growly “N’awlins” patois very quietly utter ... “Ok kid, show me whatcha got” ... a phrase that not only raised the hair on my arm, but started my heart pounding at a never-before-felt tempo which led to the lamest but most sincere Mac/Booker/Longhair/Toussaint-inspired 30 seconds of key bending I had in my kit, followed by the longest silence I can remember ... followed by a four-minute non-stop, loving life piano exhibition that screamed, “I’ll show you now because I love you, but please don’t ever ask me to do this again” playbook. Lesson learned, not without deserved humiliation, but knowing underneath it was an affection and warmth that might take me some time to figure out.

Anyway, I was reminded of those four minutes of “the Lesson” because listening to this album was as close to that evening as I think I’ll ever get again, because on this album, we’re all on that piano bench listening to the Good Doctor take us on the most effortless (to him) but also the most personal and intimate journey into his soul that had ever been put on tape, if that’s what it was recorded on. I’ve been fortunate to possess, and to continue to enjoy, nearly every piece of recorded music that Mac did over the years, but in this one he decided to give us this time capsule that went all the way to his Mac and the Dominoes high school roots, traces Highway 61 which Hank and Johnny traveled from New Orleans to Shreveport (“Louisiana Hayride”), to Memphis and then to Nashville, making a few stops along the way in Dr. John Creaux-land, and then finishing it off with some of the jazz licks he loved, a little Charles Brown, a little Nat King Cole with a touch of Booker and Fess thrown in.

And if that wasn’t enough, he asked his young friend Lukas Nelson (and Promise of the Real) to join him for perhaps the darkest “I WALK ON GUILDED SPLINTERS” I had ever heard outside of a night at Tips just AFTER closing time. And of course, young Lukas’ pa (Willie) to duet with him on “GIMME THAT OLD TIME RELIGION.” You just don’t get a Dr. John album without going to church somewhere along the way, and on this one, you get the bonus of a lovely, spare Willie guitar solo to play against Mac’s singular piano lines and Jon Cleary’s B-3, not to neglect the groove set by long-time Mac drummer Herlin Riley.

You just don’t listen to a Mac album the way you listen to others. You play a track, maybe move on to the next one, and then come back to the one you listened to before, because you know you missed some of the magic, and your ears are now ready for a second hit on the bottle. That’s certainly the way it was for me when I landed on “END OF THE LINE,” a Wilburys

standard that I must have heard a hundred times, but never like this. I found stories buried in Mac's cover that never even crossed my mind when I heard it from Messrs. Petty, Lynne, Dylan, Harrison and Orbison. In fact, no disrespect to that esteemed supergroup, but hearing Mac, Aaron Neville and label mate Katie Pruitt attack that song brings new life to this classic.

When he went back to revisit the classics like Willie Nelson's "FUNNY HOW TIME SLIPS AWAY" (who guests beautifully on this album) or Hank Williams' "I'M SO LONESOME I COULD CRY," the same thing happened. I had heard both of those songs most of my life, but when I heard that line "hear that lonesome whippoorwill, he sounds too blue to cry," it was like I was hearing it for the first time (along with some tasty fret work by guitarist Shane Theriot). And not unlike some other songs on this album, my mind started racing back to other standards on other Mac records that did the same thing to me ... ballads like "MY BUDDY" and "DON'T LET THE SUN CATCH YOU CRYING," and the classic "HOW COME MY DOG DON'T BARK WHEN YOU COME AROUND," a lesson in classic timing that no comic ever delivered better than Mac.

Mac often loved the idea of allowing you to find one of those gems in his work, and on this album, it's "GIVE MYSELF A GOOD TALKIN' TO," a gentle object lesson for life with guilt that speaks to Mac's ever-present ability not only to tell the joke but be the joke. And if you don't get the joke after listening to that track, put the needle down or just press play on "SLEEPING DOGS BEST LEFT ALONE," a parable on its own, but when Mac applies his best gravelly lower register to it, you never want to hear anyone under the age of 60 touch it. 'Cause as Mac might have said, "Well, dat's dat, dis is dis, and I think it's time to ejacutate dis joint" (he actually did say that, as I recalled when I was asked to speak at his memorial service and collected some of the best Mac-isms from some of his friends ... we all had them). Fitting then that when I glanced at the track listing, both of those songs were co-written by Mac, who not only created them, but lived them.

Another Mac original for this project is "HOLY WATER," a song I learned seems to look back to his 1960 narcotics conviction which led to a federal prison sentence that resulted not so much on treating his addiction but found him more focused on a career in music. Listen to the lyrics, and as he often did, find the message between the lines, just like he did when he slid his trademark arpeggios drowned in gumbo over the keys. This track might just be the most introspective song of all on this album. Again, Katie Pruitt adds a layer of sweet to this track.

Mac takes a second swing at a Hank Williams song on this album, a tale of the call of the road (Hank and Mac both sure loved the road). "RAMBLIN' MAN" takes a song that already sets a tone of melancholy and "see ya," and makes it even more self-exploratory, yet like almost every song here, Mac's sense of the dramatic breaks through.

On "GUESS THINGS HAPPEN THAT WAY," Mac, a huge fan of Memphis' Sun Records as well as Cash, again takes the road less travelled. Johnny's version, as it should have been, was the recounting of the end of a love affair by a man in his 20s, which Johnny was when he recorded it. Dr. John is the world-weary veteran of maybe too many love affairs, who still believes there's a chance, but is fatalistic enough to know that it's not likely. No reason not to wrap up an album

that spans a 60-year-plus career with one more lesson, especially from someone who has seen as much as Mac has over a lifetime.

It's always a good idea to conclude liner notes with a summing up of one's thoughts. In this case, despite the fact that my friendship with Mac goes back to the early 1970s, there's nothing I could say that says it anywhere near as well as he does as he skillfully walks through a life well lived ... not without its challenges, not without its victories and some losses, but at the end, a life that we are all the better for having shared with the good Doctor, my friend, Mac Rebennack.