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Eddie Bo:
High Priest
of Funk

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On what is only his second night in a new venue, Eddie Bo already has the joint jumping. For nearly three non-stop hours, the compact, energetic figure with the silver goatee has been holding forth from behind the grand piano at Tipitina's French Quarter with highly infectious enthusiasm—crooning, shouting, gleefully shrieking when called for—showering the happy hour crowd with joyous renditions of New Orleans favorites (“Blueberry Hill,” “Iko Iko”), soul classics (“When a Man Loves a Woman,” “Land of 1,000 Dances”), venerable oldies (“Lucille,” “Under the Boardwalk”), R&B ballads (“Georgia on My Mind,” “Dock of the Bay”), and a hit or two of his own (“Every Dog Has Its Day,” “Check Mr. Popeye”), until the last of those seated, local and visitor alike, has little choice but to join the bobbing, twirling throng on the dance floor, where all involved are, quite simply, boogying up a storm.

Knowing he's been in the business for more than 45 years, you might suspect he's just going through the motions, half-heartedly playing a tourist set for the easily entertained. You couldn't be more wrong: Eddie Bo does nothing half-heartedly. At an age when most Americans are mainly contemplating the final stretch, Eddie Bo is approaching life with the fervor of a bright-eyed recruit. In the past six months, he's finished his third self-produced CD in five years, *Nine Yards of Funk*, which showcases his funk and jazz licks behind a group of wonderfully philosophical compositions; he's toured Europe in a series of stadium concerts that drew record-setting audiences and wildly enthusiastic reviews; and he's been interviewed and performed for a PBS special set to air in January, *River of Song*, that traces American popular music from the headwaters of the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico.

Now he's moving his regular happy-hour gig, after five years of increasing success in the cocktail lounge of Margaritaville, to the big stage of Tipitina's French Quarter, smack-dab in the middle of a neighborhood—with the House of Blues already installed and both Levon Helm's American Music Cafe and Quint Davis' multi-stage Storyville set to open in coming months—which promises to be a center of night life in the city that practically invented the concept. Increased visibility couldn't happen to a more appropriate artist. In many ways, Eddie Bo embodies the very best of New Orleans musical culture, its funkiness and unbridled spirituality, its virtuosity and inventiveness, its generosity and humility; its persistence and staying power. Unfortunately, he has also had to assume the implicit burden of the New Orleans heritage: a lack of public recognition and very little

monetary reward. But true to the tradition, none of that matters to him, because he genuinely believes he's just now reaching the prime of his life.

If you aren't already a loyal fan or don't really know who Eddie Bo is, you should know this: Eddie Bo is the best-kept secret in New Orleans.

Fish fries, Schoolin' with 'Fess, Forging the Funk

Eddie Bo was born Edwin J. Bocage, in a family that excelled in both the building arts and music. “All the Bocage males from five years old had to learn how to build,” he told *OffBeat* a couple of years ago. “All of us were carpenters, we all had to learn to be masons. We were all builders and we had to learn to do that when we got old enough to stand up and walk. Believe me, that will keep you eating.” Two of his uncles, Peter and Charles, and a cousin, Henry, played in the renowned A.J. Piron Orchestra beginning soon after

naire Henry Roeland Byrd, aka Professor Longhair. From both his mother and 'Fess, Eddie Bo gained a fundamental education in the fine art of barrelhouse piano.

“There was only pianos when I was coming up,” he recalls. “There must have been a piano in practically every house I went to. No drums, no bass, nothing like that. What my momma played, that was the same thing 'Fess played, what they called the 'Junker's Blues.' Man, you had to play that if you wanted anybody to listen to you. Lots of them played that way, but 'Fess brought it out to the public. I sat around him a long time, man, we were very close. Now, he had a gift from God; they can imitate him to a degree, but they can't duplicate him. He could take a simple chord progression and run it from one end of the keyboard to the other, he could do so much with just that simple progression. Being around him like that, I learned a lot just from his way of thinking.”

After serving in World War II, Eddie Bo began studying music at the Grunewald School of Music, organized specifically for veterans. There he absorbed the emerging developments in modern jazz and began to acquire a taste for pianists like Art Tatum and Oscar Peterson. He also became part of the post-War jazz scene in New Orleans, a community centered on frequent jam sessions.

This time of cross-pollination, when a musical city was chock full of ambitious young players eager to teach and learn from each other, continues to animate his imagination.

“At the beginning I wanted to play jazz,” he says, “but I had this other thing inside of me all, and I just wanted to see how far I could take it. I was growing fast in the jazz, but I never had a dollar. It's hard living in the dark with your lights out, no bread. I decided I would like to pay my rent for a change. The other concept of my moving to another category was understanding that most people have to deal with so many problems in the course of their work day, they don't want to hear too much sophistication when they go out at night. They want to turn it loose. And when they go out and turn it loose, they want to be able to feel something. So I played the things I knew and felt, and I added on the things I learned.”

He became a major figure in the New Orleans music industry from the mid-1950s, when he joined the house band at the Club Tiajuana, a satellite of the Dew Drop Inn, until the early 1970s, when he began a period of semi-retirement that lasted nearly two decades. He played in touring bands, backed a ton of star musicians, and cut what seemed like an endless stream of 45s for just about every label that did any recording in the Crescent City. One of his first regional hits, “I'm Wise,” for the Apollo label, was rere-



World War I. The most distinguished of the three, trumpeter Peter Bocage, a friend of clarinetist Sidney Bechet, began his career in 1906, played with Joe “King” Oliver in Storyville and worked in Fate Marable's riverboat orchestra. After World War II, Peter Bocage, who died in 1967, recorded with the Eureka Brass Band and his own group, the Creole Serenaders.

The first significant musical influence on young Eddie Bocage was his mother, Iona, a blues pianist and gospel singer who was much in demand for playing neighborhood fish fries, a traditional combination of block party and rent-paying fund-raiser. Through his father, a professional gambler, young Eddie early on met two frequent customers, the singer Tommy Ridgley and another strong influence, pianist extraordi-

BY ROGER HAHN

corded as a national hit by Little Richard as "Slippin' and Slidin'." Another, "Every Dog Has Its Day," went on to become a favorite regional oldie. His take on a local dance craze, "Check Mr. Popeye," got some national attention and sold big in parts of the Northeast. He also produced and wrote for other artists.

By the end of the 1960s, Eddie Bo was perfecting a new style of rhythm and blues along with other bands in the area. Influenced by soul pioneers like Ray Charles and James Brown, the New Orleans bands were developing a syncopated stew based on a heavily accentuated beat with echoes of the traditional, street-band, parade rhythms along with a harder, more insistent rock'n'roll edge. With bands like The Meters and Willie Tee & the Gators, Eddie Bo was evolving into a style that would come to be known as funk, a musical approach as adaptable to Memphis soul as it would prove to be to New York jazz. Funk took on a decidedly New Orleans flavor in the mid-1970s with the Wild Magnolias and Wild Tchoupitoulas recordings and has remained a fundamental component of the pop music scene, surfacing with greater popularity among a younger generation of music fans (and even finding its way to Broadway) in the 1990s.

A gift of music and the labyrinth of harmonics

The late 1950s and early 1960s were good years for popular musicians in New Orleans, but very few would survive the dramatic changes in the industry that swept through the late 1960s. By the early 1970s, Eddie Bo had made two crucial decisions: he would no longer rely solely on music for his livelihood and, when he did record, he would record on his own terms. In short order, he set up his own publishing company and record label, and cut a funkified version of the old blues, "Your Bucket's Got a Hole in It," reborn in percolating fashion as "Check Your Bucket." Around the same time, he began a renovating business that continues to this day. In the late 1970s, he resurfaced briefly with his own club, El Grande, which lasted less than a year, and a couple of self-produced albums, *Another Side of Eddie Bo* and *Watch For the Coming*.

But for most of the 1970s and 1980s, Eddie Bo was absent from the New Orleans music scene, reappearing briefly, as he did for the 1985

Jazz and Heritage Festival, then vanishing again. When he found his way back to music in the early 1990s, it was as a subtly transformed Eddie Bo. The jeweled turbans of his early years were replaced by cloth turban caps, the legendary stage shows became occasional

followed by an exclamation point.

"People all over the world ask me the same question," he told us. "Your approach to the music is funk, but we hear something else in it, too. Part of the reason my music sounds the way it does is I don't like to play in simple chord progressions; when I play in New York, a lot of the jazz musicians come out because they like to listen to the way I approach the funk, adding all those 11th and seventh and raised ninth chords.

"So the funk has a distinct flavor, because I add some things to it — I call it a "confunktion" — things you pick up in the pool hall, things you hear the fellas talkin' about in the 'hood. Even watching the dancers. The feeling from church. And when the bands come out to perform in the parades, that stays in the air, that funk is always hanging in the air.

"I really believe the gift of God was put here musically, here in New Orleans, some kind of mysterious gift of music. And when you get a feeling to play, all the way back to those early players, you're just bringing something of

your own to the same table.

"What I try to teach the younger musicians is to learn how to listen, and personalize what they hear. Play it, feel it, and then personalize it. That is something I'm still cultivating. You never get to the end of it. There's no end to the grooves. All you have to do is listen and feel, and want to cause the people to relax when they come out.

"What's the secret to how I get everybody dancing? I watch the room for the pretenders, the great pretenders, and I play just for them. And when I get the pretenders to take off their masks, and get 'em up off that stool, that's when I know I'm locked in, that I've got it going. See, I don't want anything I can't feel.

"And everywhere I go, all over the world, the youngsters are beginning to hear it. That's my biggest audience now! That's what they come to hear, and they come in droves, to get their Eddie Bo 'fix.' The same with people who come to see me here in New Orleans. There is one couple from Montgomery who said if they only had 24 hours left to live, they would rent a limousine and come down to New Orleans and hear Eddie Bo."

But aren't these devoted fans hearing something else, too? An unstoppable enthusiasm, some kind of everlasting delight, another dimension that injects his performances with a brightness and spark found in few musicians of any age?



The 1988 Rounder Records release, *Check Mr. Popeye*, features recordings produced by Ric Records from 1959-1962.

second-line excursions into concert audiences, and the effervescent tunes that once tapped directly into dance crazes began to display an introspective flavor. "Shoot from the Root," which serves as the focal point for *Eddie Bo and Friends*, his first CD of the 1990s, showcases a deliriously ecstatic performance fired by the high-octane tuba riffing of Anthony "Tuba Fats" Lacer that has the singer telling us:

*"I get this song from deep within,
It flows to me from a natural spring,
It keeps me up on a natural high,
I can't come down if I try,
I'm a shoot from the root,
I'm for real, real, real."*

When we caught up with Eddie Bo in Audubon Park on the first breezy day of fall, we wanted to know where he had been all those years. But first, we inquired into his particular musical methods.

Listening to Eddie Bo talk is a lot like listening to Eddie Bo play and sing. Obviously intelligent and unquestionably down-to-earth, he has a way of going straight to the heart of the matter, giving it his own spin, and moving on the next subject; with the energy of a youngster, he conveys a state of perpetual jubilation, keeping his pronouncements short and concluding them with a flourish, as if every sentence ought to be

"That's it exactly, that's the key," he continues, happily. "It's a spiritual thing. The music, or any other art, has no form unless there's something spiritual attached to it. That's what I was looking for fifteen years ago, when I took off from music to find myself. Something strong in me just made me want to leave everything to go and find out."

"I began to look for myself in the 1970s and I spent most of the 1980s just searching. The first time I went to Florida, and the second time to Africa, to find a friend who told me about what you might call a guru. And I sat at his feet and I listened, and I've listened in many countries to different people, and what I found was that the answers were inside me. And to seek that, you have to have the heart of a child."

"When you find what you're looking for, you can pursue any art, anything you choose, and you will be successful! If you plant seeds, some will come up and some won't. I believe the seeds that agreed to praise God came through the earth. So, when I came through, I had to have agreed to give Him credit. Everything I've ever done, and everything I will ever do, comes from Creation."

"You see, I contribute my life to the Most High, all credit goes to the Most High. Because I've given myself to the One who gave me life, and I've given it back to Him, my feeling about what I'm doing now is that I'm just getting started, like I'm a child with his first toy. The labyrinth of harmonics in music is just too vast, there's too much to be grasped, you can't grasp it in a normal lifetime."

The living tradition and a taste for longevity

And you can't hope to comprehend all of Eddie Bo in a normal interview. We talked for about an hour before lunch time beckoned, and we adjourned to Dunbar's for the red beans special. Thinking about the conversation, I considered Eddie Bo in a new light.

In the 1990s, he has become a remarkably deceptive musician, incorporating layers of subtlety in performances that appear on the surface to be quite simple. His rollicking keyboard work has, in time, become a distinctly signature style. In a recent review in *The New York Times*, writer Jon Pareles called him a "one-man orchestra" and described his style as "less florid and more percussive than Dr. John, more assertive than Allen Toussaint"; the reviewer might also have mentioned those lightly applied, sophisticated touches provided by his up-to-date harmonic embellishments and the heart-racing pulse always anchored in the world of funk he deploys within a variety of rhythms.

Time has, in fact, distinguished Eddie Bo's accomplishments to a greater degree than any of his contemporaries, allowing us to see the unique extent to which he blends the ancient roots of the music with the most modern conceptions. Arranged around a core beat based on second-line rhythms, what flows through Eddie Bo's veins is a musical heritage that encompasses everything from turn-of-the-century brass bands to what's happening today, all expressed in a manner belonging to no one else. More than any

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other New Orleans musician of the late 20th century, Eddie Bo has come to represent, as a recent article on the New Orleans scene in *Conde Nast Traveler* noted, "the living tradition," with an emphasis on both parts of that description.

On his latest CD, the living tradition takes the form of inspired concepts that bridge the worlds of both folk blues and soft jazz, all the while incorporating a basic funk adaptable to diverse ingredients from Delta mouth harp to synthesized strings.

Nine Yards of Funk is a smoother and more contemporary recording than you might expect from Eddie Bo. There is far more keyboard playing than on previous recordings, in instrumentals closer than ever to the funk-jazz border. Throughout, he makes use of a vocal range, extended now in both coarseness and depth, to amplify particular styles, narrowing the tone to punctuate more excited numbers with soul shouts, broadening on bluesier tunes to meld with the instrumental accompaniment; emphasizing versatility, he adds harmonica, tuba, trumpet, percussion, and synthesizer parts himself. Three numbers, "Jukin'," "Black Cat Bone," and "Chicken Talk," hint at the grass-roots tradition inherited from his mother; on the

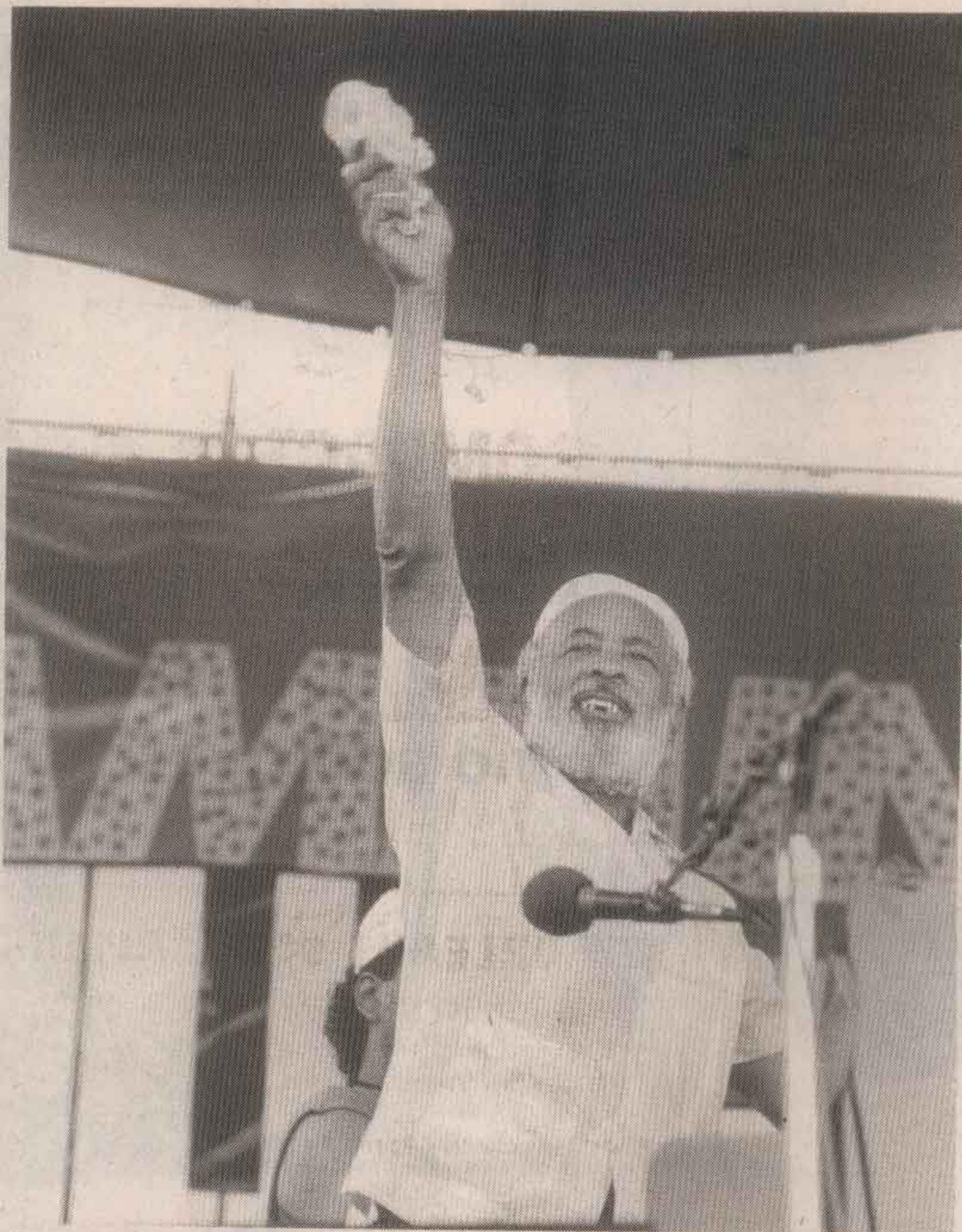


PHOTO: CLAYTON CALL

"WHAT'S THE SECRET TO HOW I GET EVERYBODY DANCING? I WATCH THE ROOM FOR THE PRETENDERS, THE GREAT PRETENDERS, AND I PLAY JUST FOR THEM. AND WHEN I GET THE PRETENDERS TO TAKE OFF THEIR MASKS, AND GET 'EM UP OFF THAT STOOL, THAT'S WHEN I KNOW I'M LOCKED IN, THAT I'VE GOT IT GOING. SEE, I DON'T WANT ANYTHING I CAN'T FEEL."

—EDDIE BO

I'm asking for help from up on high,

Today I'm going to make a change in my life,

I know I said it before, but that's all right."

Eddie Bo's career naturally suggests a comparison to jazz legend Sonny Rollins, who also left music on two separate occasions to pursue a spiritual quest. As with Rollins, what Eddie Bo reinvested in his music did not result in extreme changes in style, but rather a dimension more implied, a renewed dedication to fundamentals and universality. Unlike Rollins, who works in the virtuoso tradition of bebop expression, Eddie Bo's idiom derives from the frequently misinterpreted New Orleans trade of musical entertainment and from the modern evolution, rooted in second-line folk culture, of the African American musical genre updated as funk. For both artists, the spiritual connection has translated to exceptional longevity and continued creativity. And in Eddie Bo's case, the fruits of all that cultivation are available anytime you happen to be in New

Orleans on a weekend around supper time. All you have to do is stop by, walk in, and enjoy yourself.

Orleans on a weekend around supper time. All you have to do is stop by, walk in, and enjoy yourself.

Eddie Bo makes it just that easy, and that profound. ☺

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THE RECORDINGS OF EDDIE BO

In the 1990s:

Nine Yards of Funk (Bo-Sounds)

Eddie's latest, a fresh program of jazz-inflected funk covering blues tributes, inspirational smooth grooves, and extended instrumental improvisations.

Back Up This Train (Bo-Sounds)

Featuring guitarist Walter "Wolfman" Washington and the late saxophonist Fred Kemp, among others, a hard-driving collection built on funk grooves of the early 1970s.

Eddie Bo and Friends (Bo-Sounds)

With guests Johnny Adams, Earl King, and Bo Dollis, a high-spirited roundup of funky R&B from the 1960s, with all-star backing from drummer Herlin Riley, guitarists Wayne Bennett and Carl LeBlanc, saxophonists Roger Lewis and Red Morgan, others.

Hole In It (Soulciety)

European import. Repackaged, reprogrammed version of *Back Up This Train*.

Shoot From the Root (Soulciety)

European import. Repackaged, reprogrammed version of *Eddie Bo and Friends*.

All of the above, except for *Eddie Bo and Friends*, which is currently out of print, are available for \$18 postpaid from Bo-Sound Records, P.O. Box 50997, New Orleans, LA 70150-0997, phone/fax 504-488-3593; or check out Eddie's website at www.eddiebo.com.

As Guest Artist:

Big Easy Fantasy (Wotre)

European import. Live show organized by rock'n'roller Willy DeVille featuring the Wild Magnolias, Dr. John, Allen Toussaint, Leo Nocentelli, and George Porter. Includes Eddie Bo on three cuts, "Every Dog Has Its Day," "Key to My Heart," and "Who Shot the La La" (co-written by Eddie), which DeVille also covers on *Victory Mixture*, his Orleans Records release.

The New Orleans Album (Columbia)

The Dirty Dozen Brass Band tribute to the Crescent City tradition features Eddie Bo on three cuts, "When I'm Walking" by Fats Domino, "Don't You Feel My Leg" by Danny Barker, and the Roger Lewis original "Song for Bobe."

Keys to the Crescent City (Rounder)

Solo keyboard selections from Charles Brown, Willie Tee, and Art Neville; Eddie Bo on "Hard Times," "Honey I Miss You," and "I'm Through Dealing."

Reissues:

The Hook and Sling (Funky Delicacies)

Self-produced and Scram Records singles of early 1970s funk.

Check Mr. Popeye (Rounder)

R&B from the 1950s and 1960s from New Orleans' Ric Records.

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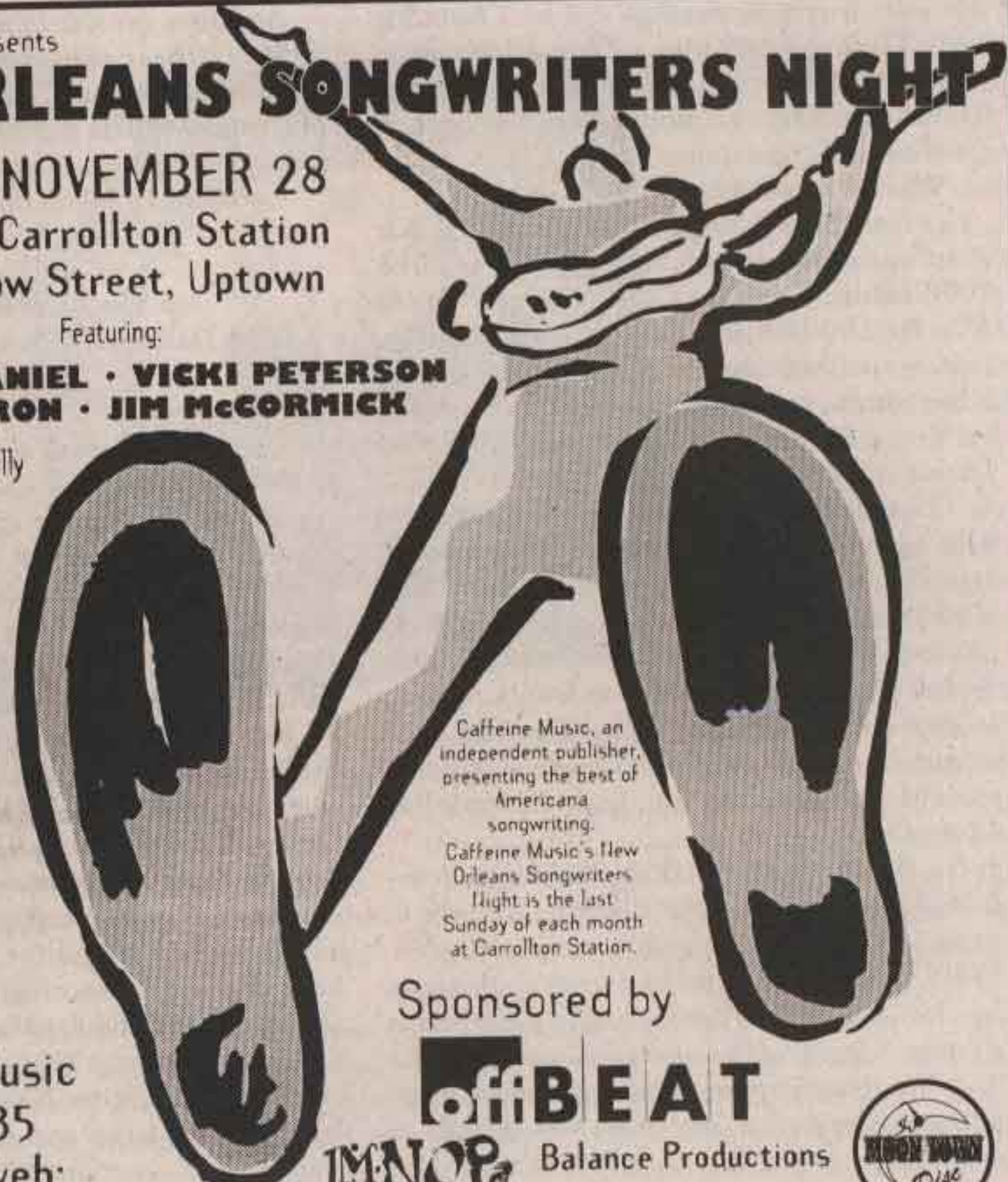
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