

## SPOTLIGHT



Sarah A. Friedman

## AARON NEVILLE

**Knocked down by tragedy, the sweet-voiced legend bounces back to spread the gospel**

FIVE YEARS AGO, HURRICANE KATRINA destroyed Aaron Neville's New Orleans home. Two years later his wife of almost 48 years, Joel, died after a long bout with lung cancer. A pair of blows like that would've tested the faith of many men, but not Neville. "My faith never wavered," says Neville, who relocated to Nashville after the Katrina disaster. "I never questioned God. My wife, even when she got cancer, she never questioned either. Prayer carried me through. That's one thing about the New Orleans people—you can knock 'em down, but they can come back up."

Those experiences led Neville to make his first new album in four years, *I Know I've Been Changed*, a musical testimony to his long-held spirituality. As a child, he was nursed on the sounds of gospel groups like the Brooklyn Allstars and the Blind Boys of Alabama. He admits that whittling down the track list for his own new addition to the gospel tradition was a challenge. "It was hard at first," he says. "There were a lot of pick from. We all talked about the music that we thought would work best."

*I Know I've Been Changed* was recorded over five days in Los Angeles, with producer Joe Henry behind the board.

"It was like a reunion in the studio—so many great musicians and background singers," Neville says. "A lot of 'em I'd been working with since the '60s." Among those longtime friends was pianist Allen Toussaint, who grew up near Neville in New Orleans and produced his first solo recordings. "It was cool working with Allen again," he says. "We recorded together from '60 to '64, and then again in '70 and '71. Right now we're working on a poetry book. A lot of the songs on here have come from me writing poetry and sending it to Allen." In addition to their musical collaborations throughout the years, Toussaint and Neville founded the charitable organization New Orleans Artists Against Hunger and Homelessness (NOAAHH) in 1985.

As he celebrates 50 years in the music business, Neville is confident that he has chosen the proper musical course for this moment. "Gospel is what our world needs to hear right now," says the singer, who will turn 70 in January. "It's uplifting. In today's music there are a lot of formulas. I don't want to get pigeonholed—I want to do more doo-wop and country too. But gospel is what's most important to me."

—Blake Boldt

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