

Q&A



AARON NEVILLE

An American treasure revisits the music that honed his otherworldly vocals

AARON NEVILLE HAS SUNG R&B, gospel and country, everywhere from Bourbon Street to *Sesame Street*, but now he's returning to the street-corner sounds he's loved since boyhood with his doo-wop record, *My True Story*.

For the new album, Neville's first on Blue Note Records, he called label president Don Was, who in turn reached out to longtime doo-wop fan Keith Richards to co-produce the project. "Keith and I have been friends for a while," says the New Orleans native. "We grew up listening to the same stuff, and when we get together and talk music, it sounds like we grew up on the same block."

Backed by an all-star band that includes Richards, Greg Leisz and Benmont Tench, Neville's distinctive tenor covers songs made famous by acts like the Jive Five, Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers and the Clovers, as well as a slowed-down version of the Ronettes' 1963 Phil Spector-produced hit, "Be My Baby." "People say, 'That isn't a doo-wop song,' but doo-wop was an era, and I picked songs from that era," Neville explains. "They didn't even call it 'doo-wop' until later on. Back in those days, it was just R&B."

At 71, Neville—who has collaborated with everyone from his famous brothers to Linda Ronstadt to Allen Toussaint—has no plans to slow down. "Even now, sometimes

a song will pop into my head at 3 in the morning and I'll have to sing it maybe four or five times before I can go back to sleep," he says. "The music haunts me."

What was the genesis of the album?

I've been friends with Don Was for a long time, and when he got wind that I wanted to do a doo-wop album, he wanted to be involved because he thought it was a great idea.

What was your inspiration?

This was something I have wanted to do for a long time. I've been inspired all my life by doo-wop. That was my first love in music, besides spiritual songs. My oldest brother,

Arthur, used to bring home doo-wop records when we were young, and I was fascinated by them. I was into Nat King Cole, Clyde McPhatter, the Dominoes, the Teenagers, the Drifters, the Orioles—all those old groups. As a kid, I learned how to sing all the parts of a doo-wop group: bass, harmonies, lead and high notes. When I was in grammar school, the teachers must have thought I had ADHD—I wouldn't pay attention to the lesson because I had songs in my head. In junior high I was in a doo-wop group, and we would sing in the boys' bathroom where the acoustics were great. A teacher would have to come into the bathroom and say, "You boys better get to class," and I'd say, "Well, I'm in class."

I like to say that I attended the University of Doo-wopology, and you can hear that doo-wop vocal flair on everything in every style I've recorded over the years. I did it on "Mona Lisa," "The Grand Tour," and "Don't Know Much" with Linda Ronstadt. I did a doo-wop EP in the late '80s called *Orchid in the Storm*, and Arthur sang with me. I've also done a split session with a doo-wop group called the Del-Royals. So making a full-length doo-wop album has been a long time coming for me.

Were you involved in the production?

I was more hands-on in the studio than I had been in a while. Don and Keith respected me enough to hear what I had to say about the songs and how I wanted things to sound or feel. It was a joint effort that everyone put in.

How was the band put together?

Don picked the band, and Keith came up with a couple of the background singers. We had the Jive Five's Eugene Pitt, who co-wrote "My True Story," Bobby Jay from the Teenagers, Dickie Harmon of the Del-Vikings, and Joel Katz. My bass player, David Johnson, and my drummer, Earl Smith Jr., sing backup vocals on some tracks to fatten them up a bit. Doo-wop started with guys on the street corner singing a cappella. When they went into the studio they recorded with bands, but they were always focused on the group harmonies and high notes.

How were the arrangements shaped?

I would tell Keith and Don the song I wanted to do, and they'd get together with the band. They'd listen to the original recording, look at chord charts, and then we'd all just go in and record the songs live. There was no problem at all doing it that way. I'd give Keith, Don and the musicians my ideas of how I wanted certain things, like the grooves on "Ting a

Ling" or "Work With Me Annie," and the band would fall right in behind me. We were like teenagers again in the studio—we had a lot of fun together. We wrapped the record in five days. I went into the studio with plans to record 12 songs and ended up doing 23 songs. So I'm sure there's going to be *My True Story* Part Two and maybe Part Three in the future.

Which songs didn't make the final cut?

A version of "For Your Precious Love," which I had recorded earlier in my career, "Honey Love" by Clyde McPhatter, and even James Brown's "Try Me"—which he recorded with the Famous Flames in the '50s. I also did "A Thousand Miles Away" by the Delfonics. There's some *really* good stuff in the can that I hope people get to hear at some point. I can't even explain how easy it was to make the record—there was no labor, just love.

here and there and bruised vocal cords—but I rest and I pray a lot. It's all up to God. I tell young singers, "Don't ever think that your voice, your talent, is all you. God can give it and He can take it, so respect it."

Anything you still want to achieve?

I'd love to work with Linda Ronstadt again. I think she's one of the greatest singers ever. When we sang together on *Cry Like a Rainstorm, Howl Like the Wind*, she said it was like our voices were married. I'd also like to work with Stevie Wonder, Gladys Knight, Natalie Cole and Smokey Robinson.

If you notice all the different styles of music I've sung over the course of my career, I have never done a blues album—and I'd like to do one. I'd like to do some more country like "The Grand Tour" and "I Fall to Pieces," which I sang with



Onstage in New Orleans, 2011

'I like to say that I attended the University of Doo-wopology.'

Keith and I were grown men acting like teens in the studio. Keith would talk to the band and say, "Aaron's going to do this song," and then he'd have to come back later and say, "Oh, Aaron changed his mind, he's got a new one that he wants to do instead." Like a kid in the candy store: "I want this. No, I want that. And give me one of those, too." I wanted everything.

How do you keep your voice sounding so pure after 50 years?

I've had some problems in the past—nodules

Trisha Yearwood. I also want to do some tribute records to Nat King Cole, Sam Cooke and Marvin Gaye. I don't know where I'll go from here, but I'm not slowing down. I just want to sing until God tells me, "OK Aaron, you've had your run. Break it up, son."

—Juli Thanki



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