

Henry Butler Bio

Widely hailed as a pianist and vocalist, Henry Butler is considered the premier exponent of the great New Orleans jazz and blues piano tradition.

A master of musical diversity, he combines the percussive jazz piano playing of McCoy Tyner and the New Orleans style playing of Professor Longhair to craft a sound uniquely his own. A rich amalgam of jazz, Caribbean, classical, pop, blues, and R&B, his music is as excitingly eclectic as that of his New Orleans birthplace.

Butler performs as a soloist; with his blues groups—Henry Butler and the Game Band, and Henry Butler and Jambalaya; and with his traditional jazz band, Papa Henry and the Steamin' Syncopators, as well as with other musicians. In 2013, Butler, Bernstein & The Hot 9 was formed to record *Viper's Drag*, released in the summer of 2014 as the first release of the relaunched Impulse! label. His recordings have been noted by *Downbeat* and *Jazz Times*, and his performances are regularly reviewed in *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and others. He has appeared on the hit HBO show *Treme* and is included on the 2012 CD *Treme, Season 2: Music from the Original HBO Series*.

Blinded by glaucoma at birth, Butler was admitted to the Louisiana School for the Blind (now the Louisiana School for the Visually Impaired) in Baton Rouge at the age of five, and cycled back and forth between Baton Rouge during the school year and the Calliope Housing Projects in New Orleans in the summer.

Butler may have been born blind, but someone with clearer, deeper, more creative vision would be hard to find. His musical ability was recognized from his first days at LSB. With no piano in his home, he memorized every piano melody he found interesting on the LPs his mother bought from bargain bins in local stores. Butler remembers the first time his mother brought home Fats Waller, and how he took to "Viper's Drag." That was the turning point, as he memorized LP after LP until he could get to a piano, in the neighborhood or back at school.

By the age of 12, Butler was not only performing regularly but arranging and composing for the groups with whom he now worked nights while he continued to attend school days. Although piano was his first instrument, it was not his only. Over the years, he mastered baritone horn, valve trombone, and drums, and when he was in high school, he began formal vocal training.

Butler attended Southern University, Baton Rouge, under the masterful tutelage of the late clarinetist Alvin Batiste, mentor to many influential jazz and blues musicians, and went on to earn his master's degree at Michigan State University. National Endowment for the Arts fellowships allowed him to study with Sir Roland Hanna, and to work with Cannonball Adderley and his pianist, George Duke. He also spent time with Harold Mabern, had a private lesson at the home of New Orleans' original piano genius Henry Roeland Byrd, better known as Professor Longhair, and played co-bills with James Booker often enough to absorb Booker's unique ideas and technique.

A Pinetop Perkins (formerly W. C. Handy) Best Blues Instrumentalist Award nominee, Butler is respected for his versatile work as a composer and arranger in a broad range of genres, and as a speaker and educator in high demand on conference programs and college campuses. For over forty years, he has conducted workshops, clinics, and master classes throughout the country. In addition to teaching in a variety of settings, including the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts (NOCCA) and Eastern Illinois University, with many of his former students now featured performers in major jazz orchestras, he has initiated a number of educational projects, both for the sighted and the visually impaired, and worked for organizations like Stevie Wonder's and Motown producer Hal Davis.

Always eager to explore new boundaries, in music and other areas, over twenty years ago Butler picked up a camera and has been taking photographs ever since, exploring the sighted world's relationship with the flat representational image and its power. His work continues to be exhibited nationally and internationally and appears in publications like the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. He and his photographic work were featured in the 2009 documentary *Dark Light: the Art of Blind Photographers*. The exhibition *Sight Unseen: International Photography by Blind Artists* has been touring since 2009 and most recently was at The Sejong Center in Seoul, South Korea.

Performing regularly at clubs like The Village Gate, Blue Note, Sweet Basil's, and Birdland in New York City early in his career, he also appeared at major festivals around the country and abroad, including a State Department-organized tour to Russia headlined by Grover Washington. To date, he has played almost every major club and festival in the United States, as well as venues in Brazil, France, Norway, Italy, Japan, Australia, and more.

While his early albums were jazz recordings featuring such top-notch instrumentalists as Charlie Haden, Freddie Hubbard, and Billy Higgins (*Fivin' Around*, 1986), and Ron Carter and Jack DeJohnette (*The Village*, 1988), Butler has increasingly turned to New Orleans music and the blues. His 1990 album, *Orleans Inspiration*, was followed by *Blues & More Vol. I* in 1992. Although he briefly returned to jazz with *For All Seasons* in 1996, he's remained immersed in the blues since releasing *Blues After Sunset* in 1998.

In 1996 he returned home to New Orleans after years in California, New York, and Illinois, and settled in as a major presence in the New Orleans cultural landscape—performing, teaching, composing, and recording.

Collaborating with Corey Harris on a duo album, *Vu-Du Menz*, in 2000, Butler spent the next three years touring with the Delta blues-influenced guitarist/vocalist. After releasing a power-packed, all electric, blues-rock album, *The Game Has Just Begun*, in 2002, Butler took things even deeper with his *Homeland*, released in 2004.

In 1993, Butler's first workshop for blind/visually impaired teen musicians, in North Carolina, laid the groundwork for the camps he would conduct in different locations across the country from 1994 until 2003, when he established what he thought was a permanent home, at the University of New Orleans. The camps provided first-class instruction in performance skills as well as an introduction to adaptive technology. The first New Orleans camp is the subject of the documentary *The Music's Gonna Get You Through* (2010). Barely two weeks after the second camp, in 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit, decimating the city, the camp at UNO, and Butler's

home—including his piano, unpublished compositions, scores, masters, and an enormous library of musical material in Braille. Butler is still at work raising funds and developing a network to relocate the camp.

Within days of the storm, Butler joined forces with a core group of preeminent New Orleans musicians (George Porter, Leo Nocentelli, Dr. John, and others) in Austin, Texas, to become, for the time, The New Orleans Social Club, and record the album *Sing Me Back Home* (2006), among the first and certainly among the most powerful of the post-Katrina recordings. For Butler, the experience provided him with a way to begin to process the losses, in the midst of musicians intent on similar goals of survival and rebirth, and to create something for others along the way.

That CD was followed by his first live solo recording, *PiaNOLA Live* (2008), receiving rave reviews. In 2011, he was featured on *The Three Kings* by the Jeff Golub Band.

An active presence on the New York City music scene, he has played at Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Lincoln Center, where he has also created programs such as one on the great New Orleans piano tradition, sharing the stage with patriarch Ellis Marsalis and pianist Jonathan Batiste, one of his former students. When not on the road, he divides his time between New York City and Denver.

Butler knows the history, and the stories, of all the music he plays and has been shaped by, including classical, opera, jazz, blues, Afro-Cuban, Caribbean, rock, and country. Throw him a musician's name, and he will tell you his or her story. Shout out a title, and his fingers immediately find their place on the keyboard and that unbelievably rhythmic left hand mates with his jazz-influenced right one to take you on a journey you didn't know you had been aching for, that oxymoron of a classically trained blues voice grabs you at just the right moment. Henry Butler is an entertainer with deep philosophical and cultural roots. He gets it from all angles, and he delivers.

A *New York Times* review of a performance at New York City's Jazz Standard described Butler as “percussive in his attack, ostentatious with his technique... the picture of stubborn mischief—and, not coincidentally, of New Orleans pianism. He obliged the spirit of the occasion with his own stylistic consommé: billowing whole-tone glissandi; furrowed, Monkish hiccups; boppish two-handed octaves; flare-ups of funk and Chopin.”

As usual, Butler is at work on a number of projects and touring regularly. www.henrybutler.com

DISCOGRAPHY

Fivin' Around, 1986, MCA/Impulse
The Village, 1988, MCA/Impulse
Orleans Inspiration, 1990, Windham Hill Records
Blues & More Vol. I, 1992, Windham Hill Records
For All Seasons, 1996, Atlantic/WEA
Blues After Sunset, 1998, Black Top Records

Vu-Du Menz (with Corey Harris), 2000, Alligator Records
The Game Has Just Begun, 2002, Basin Street Records
Homeland, 2004, Basin Street Records
Henry Butler Live Jazz Fest 2007, 2007, MunckMix
PiaNOLA Live, 2008, Basin Street Records
Henry Butler Live at the 2012 New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, 2012, MunckMix
Viper's Drag (with Steven Bernstein & The Hot 9), 2014, Impulse! Records

Also heard on the following:

10th Anniversary New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, 1979, Flying Fish Records
Handful of Blues (Robben Ford & the Blue Line), 1995, Blue Thumb
Funknicity (New Orleans Nightcrawlers), 1997, Rounder Select
Redbook Relaxers Dinner Party, 1997, Windham Hill Records
Candlelight Moments: Passionate Piano, 1997, BMG
The Mississippi River of Song, 1998, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings
Best of New Age, 1998, Columbia River Entertainment Group
Dedicated to You (Clarence Johnson III), 1998, STR Digital
In Carterian Fashion (James Carter), 1998, Atlantic
The B-3 and Me (Davell Crawford), 1998, Bullseye Blues
Greens from the Garden (Corey Harris), 1999, Alligator Records
Moonlight Moments, 1999, Columbia River Entertainment Group
Love like Yours & Mine (Davell Crawford), 1999, Bullseye Blues
Black Gold: The Best of Soul Asylum, 2000, Columbia
Redbook Dinner Party, 2000, Direct Source
The Corner (Soundtrack), 2000, HBO
Swingin' the Blues (Claude Williams), 2000, Bullseye Blues
Lookin' for a Home (Odetta), 2001, M.C. Records
The Houseman Cometh! (Theryl "Houseman" de'Clouet), 2001, Bullseye Blues
Downhome Sophisticate (Corey Harris), 2002, Rounder Select
Vanthology: A Tribute to Van Morrison, 2003, Evidence
Jump Blues (Deacon John Moore), 2003, Vetter Communications
Patchwork: A Tribute to James Booker, 2004, STR Digital
Daily Bread (Corey Harris), 2005, Rounder Select
Gettin My Groove Back (Elvin Bishop), 2005, Blind Pig
Bywater Dance (Mary Flower), 2005, Yellow Dog
Sing Me Back Home (The New Orleans Social Club), 2006, Sony Burgundy Records
Odetta, The Best of the M.C. Records Years 1999–2005, 2006, Acadia Records
Sundown: A Windham Hill Piano Collection, 2006, RCA
Do Your Thing (Papa Mali), 2007, Fog City Records
Goin' Home: A Tribute to Fats Domino, 2007, Vanguard
Simply Grand (Irma Thomas), 2008, Rounder Select
Siggraph 2009: New Orleans Music Sampler, 2009, Basin Street Records
The Three Kings (Jeff Golub Band), 2011, Entertainment One Music
Blue Christmas (Cyndi Lauper), 2011, MRI
Treme, Season 2: Music from the Original HBO Series, 2012, Rounder