

“Just stay in the pocket,” Henri Smith smiles, revealing his pearly white teeth, only to be out-sparkled by his clear brown eyes looking straight through me. He moves in time with my rhythm, “you’re doin’ just fine.” I’m on stage with some of the best New Orleans Jazz men alive—Henri Smith and his friends. I feel exposed during the intro—just me on drums with virtuoso Ben Selling on keys, playing bass with his left hand. Henri’s cool confidence calms my jitters. He turns to face the audience and draw them in.

Henri’s “pocket” implies a steady back beat in a groove with Ben’s left hand. But it’s more than that. It’s a sort of mystical state we all strive to attain where the spirit moves and we respond, blending our sounds with one another. These guys are *in the pocket* every time they play. I’m struggling. I know I don’t belong on this stage.

Henri disagrees. As Berklee graduate, local professional musician and teacher, Andrew Jones says, “Henri embraces everyone’s musicianship.” And it works.



We sound great all night long as Henri takes us along with his Gloucester, MA audience to a place we’ve never been before.

Andrew’s right. Henri Smith has an uncanny ability to spot talent no matter how buried under fears of inadequacy it might be. More importantly, Henri can draw a performance out of you that far exceeds all notions of your own musical potential.

Born and raised in New Orleans’ 13th Ward, Henri Smith grew up a music fan, but resisted performing for much of his life. As a boy, he’d sit and listen to the Neville Brothers rehearse in the back yard next door at the home of Papa French, the banjo player in the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. Henri was friends with Papa’s son along with children of other New Orleans greats, including Dave Bartholomew, who lived down the street and wrote hits for Fats Domino and others.

Henri’s mother encouraged him to sing, which he did, but only in church. In high school he was inspired by a teacher, who was a graduate of Julliard. At his mother’s insistence, he studied piano for a time, but that conflicted with his first love, football. Football won.

During the Vietnam war, Henri served as an Army specialist

on the Nike-Hercules missile radar system. While stationed in San Francisco, he performed on a telethon. “I was hooked by the *smell of grease paint the roar of the crowd*,” says Henri, ironically invoking an old familiar phrase about live theatre. “So when I got out of the Army, I decided to become a club DJ at night and work by day teaching school and coaching.”

Henri taught physical education and coached boys and girls sports for the Archdiocese of New Orleans. During the summer, he taught music camp. His students included Neville Brothers’ children, which re-connected him with the Neville family. Another parent, who worked for the famed New Orleans Jazz station WWOZ, got Henri his own radio show, on which he featured and interviewed many of his old friends and made lots

# HENRI SMITH

BY PETER VAN NESS



of new ones. One of those new friends was Kermit Ruffins, who was recently featured for his trumpet playing and his barbecue on the acclaimed HBO series *Treme*. “Kermit’s barbecue is the best in New Orleans,” says Henri.

In the late 1990s, Kermit’s 20 piece band played regularly at Tipitina’s, one of New Orleans’ most venerable clubs. Henri had sung with the band a few times, and in 1999 at Jazz Fest, Kermit surprised Henri by calling him to the stage. The band started up *Work Song* and Kermit asked Henri to sing. “It was a momentous occasion,” remembers Henri. “I never imagined I’d be singing at Jazz Fest. But there I was in front of all those people. And I got a standing ovation, too!”

You might think that the *Work Song* experience would have convinced Henri Smith to pursue a singing career. But he already had careers: teaching, coaching, radio and a local TV show called *New Orleans Live*.

“I just had too many responsibilities,” he says. “People counted on me and I couldn’t let them down.”

He did, however, take a friend up on an opportunity to act in the 1998 Mike Nichols film *Primary Colors* starring John Travolta and Emma Thompson, which was shooting in New Orleans. Since then, Henri has appeared in over a dozen films including

BRINGING NEW ORLEANS JAZZ TO CAPE ANN

*The Great Debaters, Double Jeopardy, Pink Panther 2 and Shutter Island.*

In 2001 friends convinced Henri to record a CD with many of them as guests, including Kermit Ruffins, Donald Harrison Jr, Jason Marsalis, Wendell Brunious, Tuba Fats and Cecil Brooks III, who says of Henri, "This cat is the closest thing I've seen to an honest

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politician. He's like the mayor of New Orleans. [Henri] seems like a family member to everyone, and everyone feels that way about him. And he's on the way to becoming one of the great American singers."

Eight years ago, Henri's mother finally got to hear her son sing at SummerFest. "You know, you can sing through the trees," she told him a few months before she died.

Hurricane Katrina changed everything. In one terrible blow, all of Henri Smith's responsibilities were washed away. His father safely

When Andrew Jones was unsure about his playing, he asked Amadee Castenell, "does this sound alright?" Amadee said, "This is New Orleans music. Play what you feel."

"Henri sings our music with great feeling, soul and authority," says Stanton Davis.

Feeling, soul and authority. These are the magic ingredients that inspire brilliant performances and bring the crowd to their feet. On Labor Day Sunday 2010, Henri Smith treated Gloucester to a special gift. Joining him on stage for the climax of the 8 hour *Celebrate Gloucester*, were Charles Neville, Stanton Davis and Charles Burchell along with locals Andrew Jones and Tucker Linquist. More than a thousand people witnessed the power of music to bring us together and build community. We enjoyed the fruits of welcoming a new talent to our music scene and sharing our talents with him.

A few weeks later, Andrew Jones was on tour in New Orleans. He asked people if they knew Henri Smith. Nearly every musician remembered Henri fondly and many asked Andrew to deliver their warm greetings. Saxophonist Derek Huston, who had returned from a gig with Elvis Costello and Nick Lowe said, "Henri was a huge asset to New Orleans and we wish he'd come back. He's



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in Atlanta with his sister, Henri was free to leave town and visit friends north of Boston. One of those friends rented him an apartment.

"I decided it was finally time for me to follow my dream," says Henri. "I prayed for the Lord to send me musicians from New Orleans."

Henri's prayers were answered. He re-connected with Grammy-Award-winning saxophonist Charles Neville, who lives in western Massachusetts. Lifelong friend, trumpeter and composer, Stanton Davis, who taught at New England Conservatory, found him. Henri looked up Charles Burchell, a former music camp student, who had just gotten a scholarship to New England Conservatory. When the Preservation Hall Jazz Band came to Boston's Symphony Hall, one of the players spotted Henri in the audience, asked him to join them on stage and introduced him to trombonist/composer Danny Heath, who now lives in Boston. The list goes on and on and includes saxophonist and flautist, Amadee "Castenell", who has recorded and toured with major stars including Paul McCartney, Bonnie Raitt and Paul Simon, and appears with Allen Toussaint in HBO's *Treme*.

Henri brings these old friends together with new friends from Gloucester's burgeoning music scene to fashion a unique sound for his new northern fans. And because of these players' consummate musicianship, most shows are unrehearsed.

"We have common influences and common background. It's easy to know what Henri's doing," says Charles Neville.

the kind of person New Orleans really needs right now."

That doesn't seem likely. Henri Smith has found a home here in Gloucester. "The winters are cold, but the people are warm," he says. "I'm doing what I love and the people love it."

This is exactly what the great Allen Toussaint meant when he described Katrina not as a curse, but a baptism that sent forth ambassadors from New Orleans who might not have otherwise left town.

Communities who welcome these ambassadors are blessed. Gloucester's Mayor, Carolyn Kirk says, "Henri chose Gloucester as his home after hurricane Katrina. We have welcomed him, and he has become a regular part of Gloucester's thriving music scene. We

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are blessed with the gift of Henri's music, his flair, and an infusion of New Orleans into our city's nightlife."

Perhaps Derek Huston is wrong. Perhaps the blessings bestowed upon New Orleans will multiply as Henri Smith promotes the music of his heritage here in Gloucester and all across the Northeast.

I asked Henri about his plans for the future. "I'll stay in the pocket and follow my dream," he replies. "If you stay in the pocket, everything will be created around you." ☆