

Harry Connick Jr. celebrates New Orleans' 300th birthday at a packed Lakefront Arena

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By Laura Testino, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune

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Harry Connick Jr. ratcheted the New Orleanian scale to a fiery “I just drank an entire bottle of Crystal Hot Sauce” degrees while in concert at the UNO Lakefront Arena Saturday (Dec. 15) evening.

The concert reaffirmed, in the most enjoyable of ways, the excitement New Orleans felt when the Lakefront Arena stop was added to a second round of tour dates in September. (NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune pondered the Crescent City's absence after a first round of tour dates was announced earlier in 2018.)

New Orleans is “where I feel most comfortable in the world,” Connick, 51, said shortly after the concert began at 7:40 p.m. Rather than translating to sloppiness, his comfortability read as a sense of security and confidence, and the New Orleans-born crooner tap danced and even one-man-showed during a ridiculous encore with noticeable ease, his lyrics a normal conversation (with you, yes you, specifically) that just so happened to be perfectly punctuated by some of 10 other jazz musicians.

Beginning the show with “Bourbon Street Parade” and “Take Her to the Mardi Gras,” Connick also included such things as comparing his legendary trombone player Lucien Barbarin and Saints player Alvin Kamara, “the MVPs” of their respective groups; ending the evening with a second line into the audience; and singing “Sleigh Ride” like so: “There’s a happy feeling nothing in the world can buy / When they pass around the coffee beignets and the pumpkin pie.”

The Jesuit High School grad also lamented the Catholic Church: “They have the same 12 notes in the Baptist Church as in the Catholic Church” he said, and then announced Jonathan Dubose, Jr. on electric guitar, who took the audience to (the former) church with his funky and wailing rendition of “How Great Thou Art” that made you question if Thou was perhaps Thou City of New Orleans.

The 2 1/2 hour evening collection called out other New Orleans greats. Early in the evening, it was “Dr. Jazz,” a tribute to Connick’s favorite musician, Louis Armstrong, that began with a small selection of Connick playing the tune when he was 9 years old: “Keep in mind I didn’t know it was about a drug dealer,” he joked.

Later, it was “Hear Me in the Harmony,” the song he wrote to remember family-friend James Booker, who, Connick said, would ask for a “Seagram’s and a mineral water” and then taught him the importance of plunking out a strong left-hand bass line. “Yes We Can Can”

was played to honor Allen Toussaint.

Of course Ellis Marsalis, Connick's self-described second father, was also mentioned. And then showed up. On stage. "This is the problem with introducing Ellis Marsalis," Connick said. "He's already got a standing O."

All the proceeds from the concert will benefit the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music, a project Harry collaborated on with Marsalis' (actual) children to bring music back to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Marsalis played piano while three students from the center: Mateo Smith, 14 (trumpet), Seth Perrilliat, 13 (clarinet) and Jabari Payton, 13 (trumpet), performing early in the evening.

Connick's (actual) father, Harry Connick Sr., 92, his "favorite person in the world," was sitting in the audience with some other family. "I want to impress this man, even though I'm 51," Connick Jr. said. "I want him to think I did OK."

The only times we noticed he was working, Connick Jr. was playing New Orleans jazz piano on a slate-colored Steinway. Of course, his back was to audience when he played an encore performance of "Big Chief." Once the second line ended, a platform rolled out, set up with a snare and bass drum on the back, which Connick played from a stool with his left and right feet. His left hand played that bass line on a gold keyboard while his right hand played the melody on a green sparkly keyboard.

"Fabulous," Harry Connick Sr. told NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune at the end of the show. "I approve."

Connick had the help of 10 other jazz musicians and a tap dancer: Jerry Weldon (saxophone), Geoff Burke (saxophone and flute), Dion Tucker (trombone), Mark Braud (trumpet), Seneca Black (trumpet), Neal Caine (bass), Arthur Latin II (drums), Andrew Fisher (organ), Jonathan Dubose Jr. (guitar) and Lucien Barbarin (trombone, percussion), featuring Luke Hawkins (tap dance).

All were incredible, but particularly noticeable, funky and very fresh throughout the show was drummer Arthur Latin, who is "from Texas" but may in fact have shoulder-bopped his way out of a catch basin on Frenchmen Street.

The Tricentennial Celebration tour stops in Shreveport tonight (Dec. 16), then heads to the Midwest and the Plains, where they are not so wise to jazz funerals and the meaning of "banquette." Hopefully there aren't too many blank stares, Harry. Laissez les bon temps rouler.