

REVIEW

TELLing IT
LIKE IT IS...
and WAS!

Aaron Neville
“tells” all
in a new book

By Dean M. Shapiro, Senior Editor

In the year 2000, Aaron Neville was co-featured in a book titled “The Brothers Neville,” in which each of the four of them told their stories in short, individual snippets. When Aaron was interviewed for a JazzFest cover story in 2019, the interviewer asked him some questions related to incidents Aaron recounted there and he replied, “I didn’t tell everything in that book so I need to write another one.”

Now he HAS!

In his newly released hardcover “tell all” book, fittingly titled, “Tell it Like it Is: My Story” Aaron has done precisely that. Taking the book’s title from his chart-topping hit record of the mid-1960s, he is “telling it like it is” – and like it WAS – during an 82-year journey that was as turbulent as it was triumphant.

Internationally lauded for his distinctive, “voice of an angel” falsetto, Aaron has produced a detailed biography that is a “must-read” for his millions of fans and admirers. No one could have done a better job on this biographical work of art!

In this 271-page first-person account, Aaron pulls no punches, despite throwing many of them in his younger, wilder years in the Calliope project and uptown New Orleans’ 13th Ward. He recounts, in meticulous, often chilling detail, a violent childhood filled with fistfights, criminal activity, hard drug abuse and police harassment and jail time stemming largely from the color of his skin and the thugs he hung out with. From shooting up heroin in dark basements in Harlem that reeked of stale urine to standing-room-only performances on some of the world’s most prestigious stages, Aaron Joseph Neville miraculously ascended from the depths of depravity and despair to the highest heights of international fame.

Throughout much of the book, Aaron attributes his survival and longevity to his devout faith in God and St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes, as well as his love of singing. He also lavishes praise on his “Earth Angels” – his two wives – the late Joel Roux Neville and his present wife and photographer, Sarah Ann Friedman, for giving him the love and incentive to straighten his life out.

In one of his most memorable quotes, Aaron describes the dichotomy of his darkest years. “Singing purified me. When I was onstage, I was closest to my true self; closest to God . . . When I wasn’t singing, I was an angry, drugged-out thug with a voice like an angel but no reason to be one.”

The book recounts, chronologically,

Aaron’s 60-plus-year singing career, during which he had his ups and downs. Despite his hit single, “Tell it Like it Is,” rising to top of the charts, he made very little money from it and had to work menial jobs to support his wife and four children. Struggling with his drug addiction, he endured some lean times until nearly ten years later when he teamed up with his brothers Art, Charles and Cyril to form the Neville Brothers, a multiple-award-winning group that helped pioneer the funk genre and other related musical styles from the mid-1970s to the early 2010s.

Over the years, Aaron has shared the stage with some of the world’s most renowned singers, musicians and celebrities in a multitude of genres – from the DooWop era of the ‘50s through the present. Along the way he has performed at the White House for two presidents, as well as in Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the Apollo Theater, Royal Albert Hall, Hollywood Bowl and other prestigious venues on every continent except Antarctica. He has received five Grammy Awards and numerous other awards and honors as well.

One of the book’s most touching chapters relates how Aaron met and partnered with Linda Ronstadt on duet albums and singles that went triple-platinum in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s.

The strongest of the strong points of this book is that the story is told in Aaron’s authentic speaking voice. It actually sounds like words that would be coming out of his mouth unfiltered, thereby putting the

reader right there in the room with him. Despite all the years of doing drugs and surviving traumatic experiences, Aaron’s memory is still sharp. He recalls hundreds of details with a meticulous clarity we normally wouldn’t expect from a man in his early 80s.

And, in his quest to “tell it like it is,” Aaron is now naming names. In the Neville Brothers’ book from two decades ago, he spoke of an incident in which he had to physically threaten a renowned music producer who was shortchanging him on his royalties but he didn’t specifically state who that person was. Thanks to the new book, we now know the identity of that nicknamed “Record Rogue.”

Throughout the book, Aaron speaks glowingly and lovingly about his family, from his parents, Amelia Landry Neville (Mommee) and Arthur Neville Senior (Poppee) to his Mardi Gras Indian Uncle, Chief Jolly, and his brothers and sisters and his sons Ivan and Jason who followed him successfully into the music business.

In a brief, over-the-phone interview with Breakthru Media magazine from his farm in upstate New York, Aaron confirmed that his touring and performing days are over. Acknowledging a respiratory condition, he said, “I can’t hit those high notes anymore. So I’m just sitting here relaxing and enjoying my retirement on this beautiful 75-degree day.”

Does he miss New Orleans, he is asked. “Yes,” is the short answer. “I was born there and I grew up there. I drank that Mississippi River water.”



Aaron & Joel
COURTESY OF AARON NEVILLE



Sarah A. Friedman & Aaron
COURTESY OF AARON NEVILLE AND SARAH A. FRIEDMAN

Does he plan to do any book signings, especially in his hometown of New Orleans? Unfortunately not; at least not at the moment. "I'm not getting on a plane," he firmly stated. "Too much crazy stuff going on out there right now."

And so, lastly, does newly published author Aaron Neville have any plans to write another book? "Maybe," he hinted, "But it would most probably be a collection of poems that I wrote." As for another "tell all" book, that's not likely. "I did my thing here and told it like it is. I'm done now," he concluded.

"Tell it Like it Is" includes 50 color and B&W photos of Aaron at all stages of his life and career.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF AARON NEVILLE



Elton John with Aaron in Quebec



Aaron with Linda Ronstadt at the Grammys



Willie Nelson with Aaron



The Neville Brothers in 2000. (l. to r.) Charles, Cyril, Art and Aaron
PHOTO CREDIT: JOHN NUNU ZOMOT

Makes a great stocking stuffer!



PHOTO CREDIT: SARAH A. FRIEDMAN



“THIS BOOK IS HIGHLY RECOMMENDED! BUY IT!!”
 — Dean M. Shapiro, Breakthru Media magazine

“Iconic New Orleanian, platinum-record singer and songwriter Aaron Neville, a Grammy Hall of Famer... candidly reveals his little-known personal and professional struggles.”
 — Booklist

“[Neville] leaves readers sharing his conviction that his life has been something of a miracle and that ‘my voice was my salvation.’... The author’s life has been an inspiration.... A worthwhile musical survivor’s story.”
 — Kirkus

“When Aaron Neville sings he is the mightiest of Archangels. The truth he’s written in these pages is no less powerful. He tells his riveting story with all the triumphs and sorrows, joys and frustrations he has experienced in his eight decades of life.”
 — Linda Ronstadt

“A gratifying, spiritual, and hopeful against-all-odds memoir.”
 — Library Journal (Starred Review)

The book can be ordered online at <https://found.ee/TellItLikeItIs> or purchased at Octavia Books in uptown New Orleans and other local bookstores.