

A photograph of three men, the members of the band Tavasco 504, standing side-by-side against a vibrant, abstract background of swirling colors like orange, green, and blue. The man on the left is wearing a blue baseball cap, glasses, and a grey t-shirt. The man in the center is wearing a white fedora, white sunglasses, and a black and white checkered t-shirt with colorful floral patterns. The man on the right is wearing glasses and a red and white t-shirt with a graphic design. All three are smiling and have their hands clasped in front of them.

# New Orleans' Newest Old Band Tavasco 504 has Some Advice for us all: “BE YOURSELF”

*By Frances Madeson*

PHOTO BY DALE PATRICK LATINO



Back when compact disc technology was emerging and customized personal playlists were still produced on cassette mix tapes, “Smooth” James Harris, Nick Daniels III and Earl Smith, Jr. - all graduates of Walter Cohen Senior High class of '73 - just knew they were going to make a record together one day. Emulating their musical heroes — The Temptations, The Whispers and The Dramatics — the boys formed a singing group that emphasized harmonies and background flourishes: the usual “oohs” and “aahs” and “baaaaabys,” but also whoops, screams and sexy low-down moans.

“We would bring the heat,” James recalls. “Yes, indeed.”

Ensemble vocal groups were the rage in the early 1970s. The tradition was rooted in the material reality of urban Black, working class, teenage boys who couldn’t afford pricey instruments or rehearsal studios, but had the silky, supple vocal cords of the young. They could hold time, keep a beat and express themselves in syncopated dance moves. James and Nick are baritones and Earl is a first tenor, although he has a large range. He remembers that in music class, when their teacher rehearsed the altos and sopranos, they’d sing those parts too.

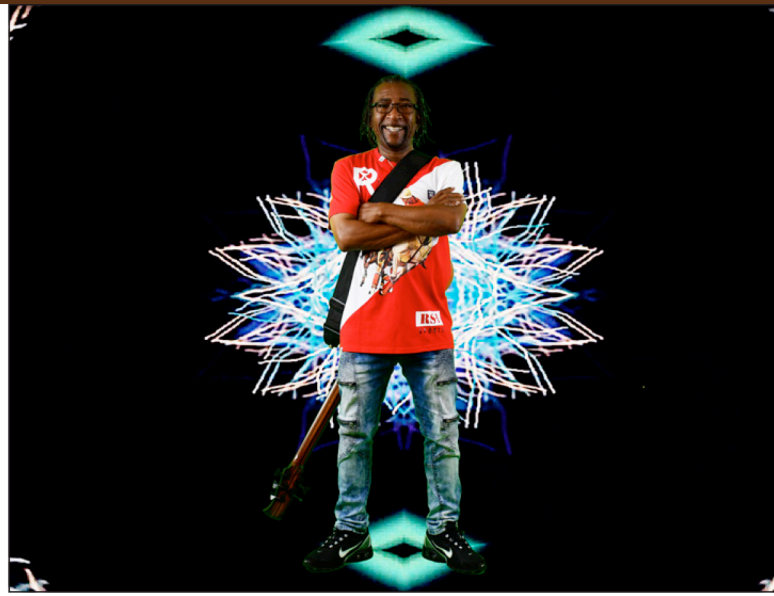
“Mr. Alexander was amazing,” Earl says. “He could hear all the vocals, but he could hear the individual voices too, and he’d say, ‘All right Earl. Okay Nick,’ because we would throw other notes in there. And he would say, ‘That’s beautiful, but that’s not in this song!’ He would test us; he took one person out of each section and stood us by the piano and we’d stand and sing our parts a cappella, and that’s how we developed our pitch.”

They came of age at the apex of the era when you could hear live music pouring out of the churches, cafes, bars and social clubs on every corner in New Orleans. Boys just like them who had met in band class, marching band practice or in church gospel choirs, could barely keep up with a live music scene that was such a vital part of everyday reality. “We were near it, listened to it and became a part of it,” Nick says.

*I loved them back in the day and  
they're still great today. I would put  
them up with any group out there,  
like the O'Jays.*

—Aaron Neville

“We were clean and classy” says James. The band was originally named The Soul Impressions, but when a lisping bartender friend suggested they change the name to Courvoisier, it came out sounding like the hot sauce. After they stopped laughing, they settled on a distinctive hybrid between the cognac and the condiment.





Their sound was so pleasing they were soon in demand, performing at school dances and spring proms in their matching tailored tuxes, ruffled shirts, bold bowties and perfectly combed Afros. Their parents chauffeured them to rehearsals and gigs until they were old enough to drive themselves and get their own cars. Nick says they were all blessed to have both their mothers and their fathers; they had stability, emotional support and space to dream. They didn't know exactly how they would cut an album together, but the certainty that they would one day burrowed in their souls like a stylus in the groove of the song of life. Fifty years later that day has come.

"Be Yourself," which had a virtual launch on Valentine's Day 2021, and is distributed by Louisiana Music Factory, features eight very different songs primarily about romance but also love for the planet and the Creator. They were written by Nick in the '80s and '90s when he was living in Los Angeles, with one exception: their friend and former Tavasco 504 member, Gerald Tillman, who died in 1986, wrote "Gonna Make it Up," a song about admitting folly and making it right. It features Earl on lead vocals singing so nakedly and irresistibly about his desire to regain his love's good graces, one can't imagine her refusing him the chance. Tillman, who New Orleanians remember as "Professor



Shorthair," also wrote for Irene Cara, Rufus and The Neville Brothers.

*This is high-volume,  
universal music to help  
you reminisce or dream  
of the electric '70s funk  
revolution.*

—Troy "Trombone Shorty" Andrews

The tunes are funk anthems and timeless and if there's one main message, it's this:

"You have to be yourself," Nick explains. "But you have to open yourself to the next person in order to be yourself."

The overall effect is a shot of feel-good music with straightforward lyrics, sung and played with the passion and energy of far more youthful men. Listeners will have their favorites (mine is "Think About Love"—when I hear love, I think about youuuuu), and no one who hears the CD will be surprised if several of the songs land on the R&B chart.

"Everybody goes through a lot of the same things," says James. "We're all different, but we're all alike. I think when Nick wrote those tunes he wrote them to be about life, and to be universal."

With the accomplishment of this CD under their belt, Tavasco 504 has a lot to

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look forward to, and they're willing to go "wherever the music takes them." But the current reality of the pandemic curtails their ability to tour and engage live audiences. Until they can, fortunately they can savor the happy memories of peak moments of yesteryear.

With their friend, Bernard Spears, Jr., who was a founding member of the group until he took the turn toward Gospel, they sang the National Anthem at three-time heavyweight world champion Muhammad Ali's boxing matches. They also opened for BB King, performing four songs a night in a magical two-week gig at the Tropicana Hotel in Las Vegas. The "King of the Blues" had the boys over for supper and they played 78s from his vast collection.

James remembers that Mr. King was generous, encouraging and complimentary. "One night he said onstage, 'These young guys are making me work!'"

They had annual gigs in Montreal and were there during the 1976 Summer Olympics. "We went everywhere," says

Nick. "Those were some fun times."

Here at home in New Orleans, Tavasco 504 performed at the grand opening of the Louisiana Superdome with the Bob Hope Special on August 30, 1975. Sharing the stage with them that night were Raquel Welch, Telly Savalas, The Commodores with Lionel Richie, The Four Tops and The Jackson 5.

Many of those opportunities came because of Leo Nocentelli of The Meters, who introduced them to Don King, and even produced some songs that were part of an album sold in the U.K., called "Hidden New Orleans."

On the record, in addition to vocals, Nick plays bass, guitar and keyboards, and Earl is featured on drums. Brian Murray plays trumpet, Terrance "Tap" Taplin is on the trombone, Emile Hall wails on the tenor saxophone and the raps are by E.R.C. Additional keyboards are by Nigel Hall and Claude Bryant who, with his partner Dale Latino, recorded and produced the album's sound with some

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*In my experience working and producing some songs for Tavasco 504, I find the experience to be like driving a fine-tuned machine. My hat is off to their new CD. They are all my Brothers.*

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—Leo Nocentelli

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surprising and enlivening effects—the more you listen, the more you'll hear.

"With this album, we've made a full circle," says Nick. "We went back to where we started. It's beyond fulfilling. It's going home."



PHOTO BY DALE PATRICK LATINO