

*"Give the
Drummer
Some!"*



Russell Batiste: Playing the Music and Lovin' Every Beat!

By Dean M. Shapiro

The scion of one of New Orleans' preeminent musical families, David Russell Batiste Jr. – more widely known by his middle name – is not only one of the city's top drummers, he's also a multi-instrumentalist, lyricist, composer, arranger and bandleader. Musically there isn't much he can't do or hasn't already done.

Like most of New Orleans' musical community, Russell Batiste has been largely sidelined by the current pandemic and the effect it has had on the musicians but that hasn't totally stopped him from working. In addition to an occasional gig here and there, he keeps busy writing, composing, arranging and – above all – rehearsing to keep his chops from growing dormant.

"I'm still rehearsing every Thursday at 3:00 inside the BB King Club. It's not open but they let me practice there," he shared.

In addition to his father, David Batiste Senior, a renowned keyboardist and leader of the early funk band, David Batiste & the Gladiators, Russell and his brothers Damon, Ryan, and Jamal and Russell's son Christopher Batiste all play a variety of instruments in the band known as Batiste Fathers & Sons. Other distinguished family members include Jonathan "Jon" Batiste, Late Night host Stephen Colbert's bandleader; brass band stand-outs, the late "Uncle" Lionel Batiste and the late Milton Batiste; and music producer and arranger, the late Harold Battiste. And the list doesn't stop there.

So what has it been like growing up in the Batiste family with



its iconic musical legacy, Russell is asked? “I have plenty of stories,” he responds. “A lot of them are probably going to come out when I do my story; when my uncles are too old to come after me. It’s going to mess everybody up,” he adds with a roaring laugh.

But, getting serious again, he continues, “It’s not going to be just about the Batiste family. It’s going to be about a lot of the great musicians who I performed with and a lot of the bands I’ve been in. I’ve got a lot to tell. A lot of experiences.”

Some of Russell’s experiences include more than just performances all around the U.S. and abroad. They also include near-misses with major disasters. When the bridge over San Francisco Bay collapsed in the 1989 earthquake he had been on it just a short time before that happened. The day after performing in Kobe, Japan in 1995, a massive earthquake hit the city, killing several thousand people. When a shop in Paris was blown up by a terrorist bomb, killing several bystanders in 2015, Russell had been in the shop just a day before the tragedy took place.

“I’ve had some close calls and been very lucky,” he said, stating the obvious.

Russell’s playing career began at a young age. “My dad had me in a club when I was about 9 or 10,” he said. “They would sneak us in, but by the time I reached 11 or 12 I was doing shows with David Batiste and the Gladiators up until my freshman year in high school around 1982. Then I became the full-time drummer for the family band, the Batiste Brothers,” changing the name from David

Batiste and the Gladiators. The band made its first JazzFest appearance in 1978.

While still enrolled at St. Augustine High School in the early ‘80s, Russell was playing saxophones in the school’s famous “Marching 100” band. “I was the first guy to rap on a football field on the 50-yard line with a marching band,” he recalled.

From St. Aug, Russell enrolled in the music program at Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO) where he studied under Roger Dickerson and Kidd Jordan. “They changed my life,” he fondly recalled. “They gave me the ear training so I could hear what I was listening to and figure it out. Roger put me behind that piano and, from that point on, that’s when I started writing and composing all kinds of music. I would write out music for some churches; gospel tunes. I was able to hear and figure it out and then I’d write it out and these guys would play it in their church.”

However, Russell didn’t wait to graduate from





SUNO when the opportunity arose to start playing lucrative gigs on Bourbon Street. Some of those gigs were with Sharon Richards, a Diana Ross look-alike/sound-alike, who was known as “The Queen of Bourbon Street.”

Russell went on to perform onstage and in the studio with such greats as Robbie Robertson of The Band, Champion Jack Dupree, Maceo Parker and others. Among the prominent drummers he mentored was Stanton Moore, one of the founding members of Galactic and other combos.

Russell relates an amusing story from his JazzFest performance onstage with Dupree in the 1990s. “At that time, I was living a rough life and I came to the gig with no sticks. I couldn’t go back and get them so I went and got two yellow number 2 pencils and did that show with them. And he (Dupree) loved it.”

He goes on to relate another story from the time when he was performing with bassist George Porter and guitarist Brian Stoltz as Porter Batiste Stoltz (PBS). “I was showing up for gigs five minutes before stage call,” he began. “Back in those days I’d walk into a club and look at George and hold three fingers up. When I did that he would immediately turn around to the bartender and say ‘Three shots of Jack (Daniels) please.’

“And I’d hit those three shots of Jack, then crawl over my drums and get behind them and then just start beating the heck out of them,” he continued. “And the rest of the band would walk up and we’d start the show. We did that a bunch of times. They were waiting for me and when I showed up I went straight to the bar, got my three shots of Jack, then got behind the drums and started pounding. And so those three shots are how I became the legend I am today,” he laughed.

As the years passed, Russell performed with a number of other well-known groups and artists, including Charmaine Neville, Harry

Connick Jr. and Jon Gros with Papa Grows Funk. He performed as a trio with pianist Joe Krown and guitarist Walter “Wolfman” Washington, and with The Meters as a replacement for Joseph “Zigaboo” Modeliste. He has released four CDs, the most recent of which is “Orchestra From ‘Da Hood.”

Modern Drummer magazine called Russell a “master of texture and changing gears.” In an interview with the magazine, Russell was quoted as saying, “Anybody can solo. Anybody can sit behind the drums and go nuts. Anybody can play riffs on the bass, and anybody can play songs on the piano. But playing music is when two or more people get together from out of nowhere and turn it into something.”

Today, in addition to performing with a mix of his family members’ bands, Russell also plays drums for Vida Blue, a rock band named after the Oakland Athletics’ star pitcher on the 1970s. The band, which released its latest album in 2019, consists of members of Phish, the Ziggy Marley Band, the Allman Brothers Band and Dead & Company (three former members of the Grateful Dead).

Summing up a stellar career with still more to come, Russell had this to say: “I had a great childhood. My life has been great all along. I got God on my side. I’ve done some stuff. So that’s where I’m at. I’m happy still trying to play music and that’s all I can do. Keep on playing the music and I love it!”



PHOTOS BY: J.R. THOMASON