

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

A Backbeat, You Can't Lose It

Whether first having heard these lyrics in the Chuck Berry classic, "Rock & Roll Music", or in the Beatles' version, they are all too familiar:

"It's got a backbeat, you can't lose it
Any old time you use it
It's gotta be rock-roll music
If you wanna dance with me"

Backbeat is a musical term referring to the emphasis on beats two and four of a 4/4 bar or a 12/8 bar. In music, the stress normally falls on the odd-numbered beats. Otherwise, it falls on the unexpected (or syncopated) beat. Emerging from the jump blues recordings of the 1940s, it is one of the defining characteristics of rock and roll and is utilized in most contemporary popular music. While several early cooks may have contributed recipes for this musical feast, Earl Palmer of New Orleans could easily be called the master chef.

A member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (and New Orleans' own), the late drummer Earl Palmer claimed that the first record with a backbeat "all the way through" was Fats Domino's "The Fat Man" in 1949, on which Earl played. While beating out the rhythm in Cosimo Matassa's J & M studio, he said that he adapted it from the strong afterbeat in the final shout chorus commonly found in Dixieland jazz. "That song required a strong afterbeat throughout the whole piece," he explained. "It was sort of a new approach to rhythm music."



"The Fat Man"

Fats Domino

None of this just came to Earl out of the blue. It was all part of his New Orleans heritage. Born in Tremé on October 25, 1924, young Earl learned to second-line behind jazz funerals and began tap-dancing in the Quarter for money. He learned the time step (followed by a stop-time break called the separator), cross step, kick step (during the bridge) and pulling the trenches (the grand finale with legs sliding behind you one at a time). He perfected the Shim Sham Shimmy and the Stomper, as well.



New Orleans' great drummer, Earl Palmer

From the streets he moved to the clubs, even doing some shows as a kid with Louis Prima. Because of dancing he learned the structure of songs, and in the early thirties he joined his mother and aunt on the black vaudeville circuit. The later thirties had him under the tutelage of blues singer Ida Cox and her Darktown Scandals Revue. Since great art consists of knowing what to omit so the viewer (or listener) can fill in the blanks, playing for an audience taught Earl timing and the intuition to pause for an emotional response. What could have been a more perfect foundation for a drummer? Plus he played the snare drum in his high school marching band.

In New Orleans until 1957, Palmer was the session drummer on Shirley and Lee's "Let the Good Times Roll" and "Feel So Good", hits by the Spiders and Roy Brown, Lloyd Price's "Lawdy Miss Clawdy", almost all of Little Richard's hits like "Tutti Frutti" and "Good Golly Miss Molly" and Fats Domino's "I'm in Love Again" and "I'm Walkin'" (Earl's favorite with its second line intro)". Earl said that most everything he did before Little Richard was "a shuffle or slow triplets". For Fats and Smiley Lewis he did shuffles. But with Little Richard it moved "to that straight eighth-note feeling", providing another reason for developing what has become known as the rock and roll beat. He explained that it "came from trying to match Richard's right hand". Palmer's carnival snare influences and his melding of that strong backbeat with local bands' solid riffing created a New Orleans sound and the beginning of what came to be known as rock and roll. Earl expounded, "You could always tell a New Orleans drummer the minute you heard him play his bass drum because he'd have that parade beat connotation."



Just two of the many recordings made great by Earl Palmer

In 1957, Earl went from LA to L. A. where his influence on music was phenomenal. He played on most, if not all, recordings of Ritchie Valens, including "La Bamba". Sam Cooke's "Shake" and "You Send Me" and the Righteous Brothers' "You've Lost That Loving Feeling" are

among his repertoire. He played drums on everything from "Rockin' Robin", Little Bitty Pretty One" and the "Summertime Blues" to "The Purple People Eater" and "Surf City". He worked with Rick Nelson, Ray Charles, the Ronettes, Bobby Vee, Bobby Darin and the Beach Boys. He did jazz and big band sessions with Frank Sinatra, Count Basie, Nat "King" Cole, Sarah Vaughn and Dizzie Gillespie. He was Hollywood's most sought after musician for soundtrack work on television and the silver screen. And yes, that's Earl on TV theme songs "The Brady Bunch," "Green Acres" and "Mission Impossible". The list of accomplishments is seemingly endless.



Earl Cyril Palmer (October 25, 1924 – September 19, 2008)

In January of 1973, Earl Palmer played for President Nixon's inauguration. In 1999 came his biography, "Backbeat: Earl Palmer's Story". In recent years, he made visits to New Orleans for Jazz Fest and the Ponderosa Stomp. I was most fortunate to have engaged in a lively conversation with Earl on his visit to the Ponderosa Stomp at the old Rock 'n' Bowl location. He was very proud of his early days as a

dancer and emphasized the important lessons he learned from those experiences. He told me tap-dancing provided him with a sense of "rhythmic timing," which he retained through all his years as a drummer.

Earl Palmer died in Banning, California, September 19, 2008, and is buried in Riverside, California. He was married four times, and was the father of seven children.

The "Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll" (1976) recognized Earl's genius and called him a "master of bass-drum syncopation and possibly the most inventive drummer rock and roll has ever had." This ubiquitous drummer, who tap-danced as a kid for nickels and dimes, exported his rock and roll backbeat from New Orleans to Los Angeles. From there the sound of New Orleans became America's sound - and the World's. It wasn't the first time.

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