



Key of funk

Big Sam's Funky Nation

Big Sam's big New Orleans sound

Big Sam Williams has not put the traditions of New Orleans jazz and R&B behind him. Far from it. The music, and the culture

by
Bill Forman

Preview:
Big Sam's Funky Nation performs Friday, Aug. 9, at 9 p.m. Sounds Good opens. Tickets: \$15/advance (eventbrite.com); \$20/door

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Stooges Brass Band in his teens; and even played with the city's famed Dirty Dozen Brass Band.

But through it all, the larger-than-life singer, trombonist and bandleader also has leaned heavily on the funk. And with *Songs in the Key of Funk* (Vol. 1)—the latest album with his current band, Big Sam's Funky Nation—the title (a nod to Stevie Wonder and his 1976 album, *Songs in the Key of Life*) is a clue to the deep 1970s and '80s funk influences contained within.

I spoke to Big Sam about the sounds of New Orleans and the new album, working with the late Allen Toussaint and returning to his hometown after Hurricane Katrina.

How has your sound changed for *Songs in the Key of Funk*?

Well, with this album, I wanted to represent the band the way that we should have been represented all of these years. When you listen to it, you can hear a heavy Gap Band influence—or Morris Day and The Time—but then you'll also hear those little hidden rhythms in the background that are more like the Neville Brothers, The Meters and Allen Toussaint. Some of the earlier albums were kind of like detours, but we still had some of these grooves within those albums.

We're really a dance band, and *Songs in the Key of Funk* is really a dance album. You pop it in, and you want to shake something.

When Toussaint passed away in 2015, you and Trombone Shorty led his second-line tribute. That must have been an emotionally powerful moment for you.

It was crazy, man. It was devastating. You know, we all love Allen, and by that point I had played with him for 12 years. It was just very emotional—it was hard for all of us. He was like the nicest, most genuine person you would ever meet. And he's a genius, man, he has all of these hits, and a lot of people never heard of him. That's the crazy part. He's also the only cat I've ever toured with where, every single night, I'd get chills just listening to him play.

If a young musician were to ask how you take all these different New

Orleans rhythms—second-line, funk, bounce, etc.—and make them all work together, what would you say?

I'll say this: It's all related, and they're all syncopated. With bounce, you have the hand claps going like nonstop, all eighth notes—or quarter notes, depending how you want to think of it. And then with second line, you got that back beat. And with funk, you just kind of cut that back a little bit. So all New Orleans music is related, it all goes back to African rhythms and things like that.

In the wake of Katrina, you commuted back and forth between San Antonio and New Orleans every week to play gigs. What did you see in your city?

It was like a ghost town. Like nothing was here, it was just empty, it smelled really bad, it smelled like death. And they had the National Guard, they had the military, you know, everybody was down here, the streets were lined with tanks and stuff. It looked like a third-world country, man, and I was heartbroken. I said, "Man, I can't believe this is my city."

And then, slowly but surely, it started coming back. But ... some areas are still not up to par. There are still abandoned properties, and the insurance companies refuse to pay people their money so they can get their houses back. So, you know, I'd say we're 87 percent back. But the culture, the way we live, the lifestyle, everything is still here. □

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