

01 May 2010 — by John Radanovich



Bill Summers. Photo by Skip Bolen.

Bill Summers' place in the jazz firmament was set the moment he tooted on a beer bottle tuned to C in the introduction to Herbie Hancock's "Watermelon Man" in 1973. The strange and haunting melody imitated the music of the Ba-Benzélé African pygmies, a long way from Detroit, where he grew up. Then again, that was a long way from the family's home in Ascension Parish. "My grandmother had been one of the first blacks to have a restaurant in Donaldsonville, in the '30s. In my neighborhood, kids would ask what I ate for breakfast and I would say 'lost bread.' Until I was a teenager, I didn't know that's what people from down in Donaldsonville called French toast, 'pain perdu.'

"I always knew I was coming back to New Orleans," Summers continues. He returned in the early 1990s, exhausted from a career on the West Coast, as a leader of his own group and a session man for just about everyone in the industry. After the fame of the Headhunters, he was in demand for soundtrack work with Quincy Jones for *Roots* and *The Color Purple*, and session work with Ahmad Jamal, Diane Reeves, and David "Fathead" Newman.

In 1998 in New Orleans, Summers formed *Los Hombres Calientes*, using huge young talents Irvin Mayfield, Jason Marsalis, David Pulphus, and Victor Atkins. *Los Hombres* recorded five enviable collections—with one Grammy nomination—then took a hiatus when Mayfield formed the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra.

Throughout his career, the one constant has been his study of drum rhythms. He created the non-profit Summers Multi-Ethnic Institute of Arts in 1992, and through it, he has taken students to study Afro-Cuban music in Cuba. He says his own first trip there was "overdue by at least 15 years"—delayed by the US embargo. He has returned as often as possible to study sacred rhythms of the bata and other drums. "The bata speaks the language of the universe and all its intricacies," Summers says. "It's on the same level as all the classical composers. It's that deep."