

# The Record

Henry Butler  
by John Radanovich  
August 2, 2002

Pianist and blues explorer Henry Butler is contradictory in the best sense. His virtuoso playing is influenced by McCoy Tyner and Schubert, yet Butler most often plays barrelhouse blues. Blind from birth, he is a well-known photographer who exhibits around the country. A musical intellectual, Butler loves nothing more than playing his stride/blues/jazz in clubs in rough New Orleans neighborhoods. Henry Butler is the best pianist in New Orleans, and is one of America's most widely talented musical figures. Really, his only shortcoming is his taste for driving.

The 53-year-old Butler began singing at age 7 in the boys glee club of the Louisiana State School for the Blind in Baton Rouge. He studied classical piano and voice, and jazz with Alvin Batiste at Southern University. He earned a Master's in voice at Michigan State.

Formal education done, Butler studied with Cannonball Adderley, and Adderley's newest pianist, George Duke. "George taught me that you don't let your right hand play anything your left hand can't play, and vice versa. Both hands needed to be equally strong. I'm still working on that."

Next he studied with Roland Hanna. "At that time I was way into McCoy Tyner, and played percussive, loud. He said things like 'McCoy can't do anything for me. He beats the piano.' He said you should treat a piano like you treat a beautiful woman." He laughs and imitates Hanna: "Would you beat a beautiful woman?"

Butler also had a lesson with the great but unorthodox New Orleans pianist, Professor Longhair. Butler says, "The first thing he said is, 'hey, man, you can move a little faster if you don't play so hard.' Now, he was definitely a percussive pianist, but I accepted that because I knew I could be more proficient if I worked on lightening up."

In the 1980s Butler recorded with Freddie Hubbard and Charlie Haden, and spent six years teaching music at Eastern Illinois University. In 1996, he returned to New Orleans where he reconnected with his old New Orleans roots. He now lives in his mother's shotgun house in the Uptown neighborhood.

Butler accompanies much of his playing with a deep, trained voice. Dr. John says he sings like Paul Robeson. About his varied piano styles, Butler says that blues is his main interest. "I love playing the blues, and that's the focus right now. I've been interested in many styles and fortunately had record companies who allowed me to record these different styles. But people hear me on these blues shows and realize that it's not just a blues deal." As for recording blues, he has done several records with Corey Harris for the Chicago-based Alligator label, most notably "Vu Du Menz."

Butler's latest record "The Game Has Just Begun," uses two known rock guitarists from New Orleans, and the pianist supplies funky, synthesized bass lines, harmonica, voice, new age sounds, and even banjo samples. Largely blues-rock, the record has barrelhouse blues, R&B, and even soul elements. Butler uses Stevie Wonder-style keyboards on the title cut, and chord changes from "Bring It On Home" for "When You Listen With Your Eyes."

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True to Butler's eclectic interests, he also includes "You Are My Sunshine," "Great Balls of Fire," and the Doors song, "Riders On the Storm." Of "Riders" he explains: "It isn't about Jim Morrison. It's about whether I like the song or not. I know lots of people have problems with him, and I can understand that. I don't admire that life, but there are many jackasses who are great musical personalities."

Astonishingly, Butler really is an accomplished photographer. He began photographing friends and landscapes as a way to improve his intuitive powers. He felt that, incapable of sight or not, he wanted to participate in the visual arts.

Mr Butler is also involved in musical education for blind and visually impaired students, in conjunction with the University of New Orleans. Currently in the fundraising stage, the summer jazz camp will teach students performance, composition, and living skills.

Butler does admit to one bad habit: he likes to drive friends' automobiles. Once in San Francisco he was pulled over by a very displeased patrolman. Butler has even managed to have a minor traffic accident; he hit the car of a New Orleans restaurant owner--who happened to be in the car at the time. In typical New Orleans fashion, the man laughed it off. "All he said was to make sure we brought him in some business," Butler says.