

# The Record

## Kermit Ruffins and the BBQ Swingers Topsy Chapman, special guest Jazz Standard

By JOHN RADANOVICH

For a New Orleans expatriate, one sure way to homesickness is to take a Thursday night call from a friend who is down at Vaughan's jazz club, sipping Abita beer and listening to Kermit Ruffins and the BBQ Swingers. So familiar that he is known all around town by his first name, the trumpet player, good time ambassador, BBQ master, and get-down griot of the Tremé neighborhood, Ruffins is the beloved king of the New Orleans brass band scene and a memorable character as well.

The sight of Ruffins' red pickup truck with a giant, smoking BBQ grill welded in the bed is as ubiquitous in New Orleans as chicory coffee with hot milk. Year round, his shows are a perfectly good excuse for a party, since he not only plays but grills, cooks, and gives away his red beans and BBQ. Ruffins doesn't often give up his grilling secrets, but he will pass on his trick for stamina. Shows at Vaughan's don't start until after midnight and continue until the neighborhood roosters start to crow. "Long as you keep eating that good old spicy BBQ," he laughs, "you stay sober." If Ruffins doesn't go to the party, it comes to his place: "I give the biggest Saints parties you ever saw. Everybody knows to come to my house when the game isn't at the superdome." He never gets to bed before 3 AM any day of the week. Forget Carnival time—that's when he gets no sleep whatsoever.

In the 1980s, Ruffins helped found the Rebirth Brass Band. Then, the dying marching band tradition was being updated and revived by the Dirty Dozen Brass Band, which was so exciting that Ruffins and his friends became obsessed with long-dead New Orleans musicians like Louis Armstrong. Mere high school kids, Rebirth's own funkafied jazz then encouraged even younger bands. Rebirth's place in the New Orleans pantheon is already secure: they penned the rollicking Mardi Gras anthem "Do Whatcha Wanna." It's a rare southern marching band from Texas to Florida that lacks a Rebirth song in its repertoire.

In 1992, Ruffins left Rebirth to lead his own group. On records for the Justice and Basin Street labels, Ruffins channels Louis Armstrong's joyful trumpet style and explores modern jazz. His voice is not quite to the level of his energetic trumpet style, but it has a raspy, rascally charm that adds to his irresistible swing. His covers include Kermit-izing Satchmo standards like "Bye and Bye," "Ain't Misbehavin'," and a redone "Drop Me Off In Harlem," as "Drop Me Off In New Orleans." These songs and examples of his impressive post-bop Miles Davis blues originals like "Leshianne," have been collected by the world music leader Putumayo Records in "Putumayo Presents Kermit Ruffins," and Ruffins is very pleased. "I'm honored, man. I understand it's the only time they've ever done that on a single musician." He even got his own colorful folk art-esk illustration on the cover of the record, in trademark hoodlum rag tied on his head, low-rider style beneath a dress hat.

Recognizing the rich, indigenous world music of our most exotic city, Putumayo has also put together "Putumayo Presents New Orleans," an excellent introduction to the city's

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musical heritage, packaged with black and white photographs and chef Paul Prudhomme's seafood gumbo recipe. The official double release date for the two New Orleans records is February 1st, in time for an early Mardi Gras on the 8<sup>th</sup>.

Just out of the studio in a Rebirth reunion recording for Basin Street Records, next Ruffins would like to do an engineered recording around his favorite record "Save the Bones," by late great New Orleans guitarist/banjo player Danny Barker. "I was so happy that Danny played on my first record ["World On a String"] but I was sorry afterward that he didn't sing on it." Ruffin's dream is to lift Barker's classic vocal and rhythm guitar off "Save the Bones" and record his own band beneath it. "We are looking at rights now to see if we can do it."

As a surprise for his Monday night show at the Jazz Standard, Ruffins says he will be getting in the kitchen at the Blue Smoke BBQ restaurant there: "I'm going to be the celebrity chef." And since Monday is the traditional day to cook beans and rice in New Orleans, Ruffins can hardly avoid making his usual enormous pot. "I think I'm going have to bring some red beans with me, throw in some hot sausages. Maybe I'll bring a bunch of frozen tails with me—for beans you can't beat pig tails and pickled meat," he adds, referring to a salted, uncured pork common to New Orleans cooks.

Unfortunately, parking issues and rigid smoke ordinances would hardly permit the iconic red Ruffins BBQ truck at the club. "I definitely just want to invite everybody to come down and have a bunch of fun," Ruffins says warmly. He pauses and then adds, "but boy I wish I could park my truck out front, though."

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