

Colbert bandleader Jon Batiste brings his Love Riot to Philly



Jon Batiste performs on the melodica with his "The Stay Human Band" at the Newport Jazz Festival in Newport, Rhode Island, on August 1, 2015. EVA HAMBACH/AFP/Getty Images
Travel Deals

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Posted: Friday, October 16, 2015, 11:30 AM

The Inquirer

It's lunchtime at the Ed Sullivan Theater, and Jon Batiste is taking a break in the midst of his 11-hour day to talk about his new job as network TV bandleader of The Late Show with Stephen Colbert.

The 28-year-old jazz musician from Kenner, La. will bring his band Stay Human to the Zellerbach Theatre at the Annenberg Center on Saturday. Batiste - a pianist, singer, and "harmonaboard" player - is part of one of New Orleans music's most prominent families. He's released five albums as a leader - Social Music (2013) is the newest - and he's been a

supporting musician for such major players as Cassandra Wilson, Abbey Lincoln, and Wynton Marsalis.

On Saturday, in addition to playing Annenberg, he'll lead two morning sessions for students at the Curtis Institute of Music. Later, he'll be joined by Stay Human for a late-night jam session at the City Tap House in West Philadelphia.

Batiste got the plumb assignment as Colbert's bandleader after guesting on the host's Comedy Central show in 2014. Batiste's performance spilled into the street in a musical "Love Riot." He didn't realize the gig served as an audition for a job he didn't know he wanted.

How's the new gig?

Jon Batiste: It's amazing. It's one of those things that you dream of. At least for me, I dreamed of collaborating with people across different genres who are in different art forms, like comedy and drama and dance, and being able to reach people of all different demographics. I never thought it would come in the form of being a bandleader on a late show, but . . . it has.

There's a conventional model of how to do a late night show. Colbert's the host. You're the bandleader. What are your ambitions to broaden that?

We're trying to bring an energy to it that is different than what you've normally felt. Stephen's whole thing is about joy. It's basically a show about love and about people from all walks of life. And that's what Social Music is really about. The idea of music being something that can happen anywhere. It erupts like a Love Riot or a mobile concert that could happen anywhere. . . . You can't hate the person next to you when you're laughing and dancing together.

That's the energy that Stephen wants to bring to the late-show format. He wants people to think and people to question, and he's got politics as a big part of his thing. But the overarching concept is the Joy Machine.

So that's the reason the two of you are dancing around high stepping in the opening?

A: Yeah. We're here to have a good time. We're going to explore some pretty heavy subject matter and have some deep conversations and great music. But the energy is going to bring joy and be transformational energy.

How did growing up around New Orleans shape your ideas about the way music impacts people's lives?

I grew up in a place that has maintained its character and the culture of being this melting pot without every really having changed. And that's rare, when you look at New Orleans.

The architecture is the same as it was 100 years ago, and the music is preserved as well: You can hear blues and spirituals and parade music, John Philip Sousa and all the people who influenced Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton.

So I grew up in that, which is a blessing. And then to move to New York, which is a global city, a global melting pot . . . I wanted to figure out how to reach all of the people I see every day.

Your audition was really on *The Colbert Report*.

The camera captured the first time we ever talked to each other.

You gave him a hard time. You were talking about improvisation and you said, "You like to read from scripts." It looked like that got under his skin a bit.

I was a fan of his in a passive way. But I hadn't studied his background in terms of his having studied at Second City in Chicago and really having that pedigree. So I didn't know who I was talking to. But looking back it was like, 'Actually this guy is an improviser.'

What you see on camera is what he is. He's a genuinely likable guy who's extremely intelligent with a huge range of knowledge that he can access at any point. He really can talk to anybody, he knows about so many different things.

When you were offered the job, did you have to think twice?

I thought for a long time. There were so many people after that first Colbert Report interview that were impressed by the synergy we had during the interview. People everywhere we'd go would say, 'You should be the bandleader, it would be great for jazz, it would be great for the music.' But I was completely against it.

Why?

I didn't know how much creative freedom was going to be allowed. I didn't know if we were going to be doing the same thing as - in all due respect, and I've even spoken to Paul Schaffer about this, and Paul and I have different musical objectives - I didn't really want to play covers all night. I didn't know if that was part of the gig.

But then Stephen called me, and at the end of that conversation, I clearly changed in my perspective when I realized this is not going to be a typical late show. That's when I realized he's on the same wavelength in his field as I am in mine.

Have you been able to satisfy yourself creatively, so far?

So far. It's too early to tell what we're even doing yet. But the idea of what we're doing is there. The idea that I'm composing everything you hear. And then there are a lot of other

skirts and things, and I love doing that, too ... It's all kind of what I imagined. But it has to evolve for me to really see if it comes to fruition.

Did you talk to Questlove from *The Tonight Show*?

A: Quest has played with on a few different occasions. He was quoted in GQ in 2014 saying his top show of 2013 was a three way tie between Prince, Beyonce and Jon Batiste. So he's been outspoken in his support for what we're doing. It's not like the old competition that you had between Leno and Letterman. It's a friendly competition between Fallon and Stephen.

You're playing in Philadelphia this weekend. Are you trying to maintain a touring schedule? Doesn't that make you tired just thinking about it?

You gotta do it while you're young. The time is now. You've got to make it happen. And I don't feel like I'm wearing down.

The "harmonaboard" that you play - isn't that really a melodica, or a hooter?

The mobility of the instrument is attractive, and it has a lot of character. A lot of people don't even know what it is, and I felt it had an identity crisis, so I decided to create my own name for it.

Why is the band called Stay Human?

Because plug-in and tune out technology is advancing at such a rapid pace to the point where we don't even really have a hold on it. I think its important for people to stay human and remember that genuine human connection is more fulfilling than anything that technology has to offer. We all have it within us and music is something that can bring that out of us.

Jon Batiste & Stay Human at Zellerbach Theater the Annenberg Center, 3680 Walnut Street at 8 p.m. Saturday. Tickets: \$50-\$20. Phone: 215-898-3900 or annenbergcenter.org.