



Jon Cleary

New Orleans' Jon Cleary is a triple threat with a salty-sweet voice, masterful piano skills, and a knack for stacking infectious grooves with melodic hooks and sharp lyrics. All of his talents are manifested on Pin Your Spin, his tough new Basin Street Records release, produced by John Porter. Backed by his Absolute Monster Gentlemen band, Cleary delivers a dozen original songs with cool conviction and expertise, and reminds us that soul can be spoken in a variety of dialects. Tight-and-right funk ("Got to Be More Careful," "Funky Munky Biznis"), sophisticated balladry ("Smile in a While," "Is It Any Wonder"), and Big Easy-via-Cuba piano ("Oh No No No," "King Zulu Strut") all of these seem to be Cleary's native tongue.

Pin Your Spin even includes a street-corner doo-wop workout, "Best Ain't Good Enough." Sung with Absolute Monster Gentlemen bandmates Derwin "Big D" Perkins and Cornell Williams, the gospel-flavored a cappella arrangement seems an ideal setting for the song though Cleary admits that the treatment came years after the song's genesis. "It was one of the first tunes we rehearsed when I put the band together ten years ago," he says. "But after

trying several drastically different arrangements, I dropped it." The song was resurrected on a recent road trip to a gig in Mississippi.

As he and the Gentlemen passed the travel time by singing doo-wop arrangements of gospel tunes, Cleary was struck with the idea of singing "Best Ain't Good Enough" in the same vein. "We tried it out in the van," says Cleary, "then cut a demo in my home studio a few weeks later to see if it would work." It worked, indeed. That demo is the take that landed on Pin Your Spin. "I'd planned to re-record it for the album," Cleary adds, "but [producer] John Porter really dug it and felt that it should go on as it was."

Cleary is a prolific writer, and he considered two- or three-dozen songs while he was assembling material for Pin Your Spin. He is as particular as he prolific, though, and he always strives to get his songs in top shape before bringing them into the studio. "I had a bunch of contenders for this record," Cleary says, "some old and some new, in various stages of completion. With some of the songs, it was a matter of working on the lyrics. Like others, "Best Ain't Good Enough" was a question of finding an arrangement that suited the song and suited the record as a whole." Because Cleary is a busy musician balancing time between fronting his own band and touring internationally as a key member of Bonnie Raitt's band, putting the finishing touches on

all of the songs was a real challenge. "In order to satisfactorily complete the lyrics to certain tunes, I'd sometimes have to wear my lyricist's hat to the detriment of my arranger's hat, or my piano player's hat, or my producer's hat." Ultimately, he whittled his big batch of songs down to the 12 gems that comprise Pin Your Spin. "The others," he says, "will sit on the back burner for the time being, until I can properly dedicate myself to getting them right."

If setting such high musical standards means that Cleary's songs take longer to complete, Pin Your Spin is evidence that the effort is justified. There's no filler here just smart lyrics, memorable melodies, and rock-solid grooves. Over the churning funk of the disc's title track, he skewers the influence peddlers prevalent in today's culture, beseeching "Don't try to pin your spin on me." In "Agent 00 Funk," Cleary embodies a sly "secret agent" who has to "operate behind enemy lines" to make time with the object of his affection. He illustrates the flip side of this tale on "Got to Be More Careful" getting "caught red handed at the scene of the crime." With its irrepressible down-tempo bounce, yearning lyric, and Cleary's seasoned-to-perfection voice, "Smile in a While" is a song for lovers with serious soul. "Is It Any Wonder" is a break-up song, with Cleary poetically telling it like it is. The jazz-tinged harmonies here help set the

mood with subtle sway, demonstrating Cleary's understanding of the power of self-restraint.

While Cleary is the prime motivator throughout, his Absolute Monster Gentlemen band does their fair share of the work to bring Cleary's musical vision to life. "They work together very powerfully," Cleary says emphatically. "There's a very high standard of technical musicianship, but the key thing is that they also play with a lot of soul and spirit. These guys dig in and play with a lot of passion, and I think it's that intangible element that seems to successfully move audiences everywhere we play.

"Living in New Orleans," Cleary continues, "I've always been spoiled for choice with great rhythm sections." Before assembling his band, he used to enjoy the challenge of putting together different rhythm sections for each gig, hiring Fats Domino's guys one night, Professor Longhair's band the next, members of the Meters on the next gig, and so on. "But one night, on my way home from a gig, I stumbled across the Friendly Travelers gospel band playing for tips in a coffee bar. I dug them, and went back to their gigs many times, sitting in sometimes, and ultimately we became friends. Then I moved to New York for a while, but kept in touch with the guys and would visit whenever I was back in town." In 1994, Cleary was invited perform for the first time at the famed New Orleans Jazz and Heritage

Festival. Instead of hiring all-star session musicians, he decided to try hiring Big D and Cornell from the Friendly Travelers. "I called them, and they said, What took you so long? Of course we want to do it!" Adding drummer "Jellybean" Alexander, whom the Friendly Travelers knew from working on Bourbon Street, the band was born.

Pin Your Spin is Cleary's third release (his second for Basin Street). The sound of the record is equal parts raw spark and refined sparkle, thanks to Cleary's seamless coupling of modern studio technology with his band's breathing, sweating human groove. Though Cleary doesn't like to talk too specifically about the nuts and bolts of how he makes records preferring to "just present the finished thing and leave the process a bit of a mystery" he offers this when pressed for details: "This project contained some of the elements of my previous albums. The first one was a studio record with more attention paid to polish and production, while the last one was simply a recording of us in the studio, playing as we would play on a gig. I combined approaches this time, drawing templates in advance for some of the songs in my home studio, and then bringing in the fellas to contribute their unique flavors."

Veteran producer John Porter was at the helm to help Cleary realize his fantastic soul vision. In electing Porter for the job, Cleary's reasons were twofold. First and foremost, they share similar tastes and backgrounds, so Cleary says he finds it easy to convey to Porter what he's trying to achieve artistically. Equally important, Cleary adds, "John brings a calm, confident, methodical approach to a process that is for me upside down and chaotic. For me, creating abstract musical ideas, writing songs, and crafting arrangements all requires a thought process that is fundamentally opposite to the pragmatic. John Porter restores order to my chaos, and he's good at it."

Cleary was recently featured in Martin Scorsese's critically acclaimed seven-part PBS Blues series "The Blues." The series' sixth film, "Red, White, and Blues," was produced by John Porter and directed by Mike Figgis and catches Cleary performing with Van Morrison, Tom Jones and Jeff Beck. Cleary's impressive past credits include work with Taj Mahal, B.B. King, and Bonnie Raitt whom he continues to tour and record with but, as Pin Your Spin makes abundantly clear, it's with the Gentlemen that his triple-threat flame burns brightest.