

Making of a musician

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Southpaw Guitarist John Rankin (B' 81, G '81) gets into the groove with local audiences in familiar venues. (Illustration by Mark Andresen)

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One of my favorite places to chill out is truly a trip back in time—the stylishly decadent Columns Hotel on St. Charles Avenue. Watching the streetcars pass by under the historic oaks while sipping a drink on the spacious veranda is a true New Orleans moment.

You don't have to keep your eyes peeled for the streetcars. Even if you're talking, you'll know. You'll not only hear them but you'll also feel them coming. Because there's that unmistakable rumble they create. The electric motor has a distinct familiar sound—that of an old friend rambling by.

But on this weekday evening, I've evacuated the veranda and relocated to the Victorian parlor where acoustic guitarist, singer, songwriter and teacher John Rankin—a featured solo performer at Jazz Fest since 1981—is playing to his highly engaged audience. His self-deprecating humor and chatter partner well with his repertoire: classical, jazz, blues, folk and classic New Orleans.

Rankin tells the crowd that his first gig, when he was still in high school, was at Cosimo's on Burgundy Street in the French Quarter. "A guy said, 'You call that music? I call that crap.'"

His résumé was off and crawling. "I flunked my senior year at Fortier (High) because I was playing on Bourbon Street at the Bayou Room." Which turned out to be a cradle for musicians, including a couple of no-names at the time: Jimmy Buffett and Stephen Stills.

Rankin, now 68, talks about a Randy Newman-esque song played by a former student, Alex McMurray, of the local group the Tin Men. (McMurray graduated from Tulane with a BA in English and philosophy in 1991). The song is about musicians: "If You Can't Make It Here (You Better Not Leave)." That draws a chuckle.

Rankin's odyssey to this point in his life is far from dull. He came to New Orleans at age 9 from Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, where his father was a historian and researcher trying to make ends meet. It was a great experience for a kid, but when a brother was born, ends didn't meet. So his dad found a job at Tulane University in the history department, where he became a legend.

From 1957 to 1983, Hugh "Big Daddy" Rankin taught Colonial America and the American Revolution. A staunch supporter of athletics, he served as faculty chair for athletics from 1962 to 1975. Rankin's mom, Betty "Big Mama" Rankin, got a job as an administrator of the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane. Rankin told fellow musician Paul Sanchez that his dad's salary didn't meet the family's needs, so Tulane promised they'd give Big Mama a job.

Betty Rankin immersed herself in traditional jazz and took son John to see the great Louis Armstrong at the Loyola Fieldhouse and to jazz funerals. During this night, before he played an original song titled “A New Second Line,” he explained: “We went to a lot of brass band funerals. They were always so happy.” He didn’t understand why. Then he saw the guy next to him was “drinking his breakfast from a 32-ounce bag.”

In 1980, a new radio station was starting up and needed volunteers. Big Mama joined WWOZ and became a mainstay known for her traditional jazz show on Saturday mornings, “Moldy Fig Jam.”

At 14, Rankin got his first guitar. After finally escaping high school, he went to the University of Southwestern Louisiana (now University of Louisiana-Lafayette) as an English major but switched to music, he said, “because I knew I wouldn’t flunk out.” He majored in all musical instruments except for guitar because there was no guitar class. After college he had a rock ‘n’ roll band and played in clubs and lounges around Lafayette. A road show band gig lasted only a year. He then went to Berklee College of Music in Boston and, at 28, got a job teaching, which he loved.

Yearning for New Orleans, he called his dad and said he wanted to go to graduate school for guitar. “I studied remedially because I had never studied classical guitar before,” he said. In three semesters, he was accepted to the classical guitar program at Tulane. Inspired by a girlfriend who had received an MBA, he earned his MBA from the business school in 1981 and an MFA in classical guitar the same year. And from then until Katrina in 2005, Rankin taught at Tulane—creating quite a Rankin family Tulane pedigree.

A terrific entertainer, Rankin’s love for New Orleans culture and music is reflected in his songs. He is entrenched here. His wife, Vitrice McMurry, is a jewelry designer and a teacher at Metairie Park Country Day School. They have a daughter, Anne, 25.

“It took me a while to figure out I’m a social person. Once I decided it was more about people than anything else, it became more fun. This is my little community,” he said, pointing to his crowd at the Columns. “I love to play for people who are having a good time and listening.”

Rankin is a left-handed guitarist and aside from Jimi Hendrix and Kurt Cobain, there aren’t many well-known southpaw guitarists with the exception of megastar Paul McCartney. Rankin, a large man, bears some resemblance to the former Beatle and

says listeners have commented, "You look like Paul McCartney."

"Yeah, take away 4 inches, add a couple billion dollars and an English accent, and yeah, I do look like him."

Angus Lind is a 1966 graduate of Tulane who spent more than three decades as a columnist for The Times-Picayune.

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John Rankin