

FRICKE'S PICKS

By David Fricke

Sunday Night Funk

It was not their usual gig: outside under a lunchtime sun. But organist **Joe Krown**, singer-guitarist **Walter "Wolfman" Washington** and drummer **Russell Batiste Jr.** came to the 2009 New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival with all of the chunky funk they put down indoors every Sunday at the city's Maple Leaf Bar. Washington, who played with local R&B gods Lee Dorsey and Johnny Adams, was a springy showman (picking the guitar with his teeth) and sang Jimmy Hughes' "Steal Away" and Lightnin' Hopkins' "Feel So Bad" in a salty growl. Batiste, from the Funky Meters, was a steady engine, and Krown blended the rippling sustain of Jimmy Smith with the syncopated kicks in classic New Orleans piano. (Krown is a killer on that instrument too.) They closed with the comic grind of Johnny "Guitar" Watson's "You Can Stay But the Noise Got to Go." Like most of their fest set list, it is on the trio's album, *Life at the Maple Leaf* (JK) - which will keep you satisfied until you get to the club some Sunday yourself.

Astral Traveling

Drummer John Vidacovich and bassist James Singleton are Jazz Fest vets. They played at the first one in 1970 (with the blind R&B singer Snooks Eaglin) and were back this year in their long-running modern-jazz quartet **Astral Project** with saxophonist Tony Dagradi and guitarist Steve Masakowski. But



the hot set I got was at the Louisiana Music Factory (local-music experts and one of our nation's great record stores) to promote a fine new album, *Blue Streak* (Astral Project). It was a special gas to see the group in such tight focus. Vidacovich and Singleton popped and weaved with spidery elasticity and rifle-shot second-line rolls. Dagradi's knotty, charging "Blue Streak" and Masakowski's "North Wind" epitomized the group's unique resolution of earthy and airy - an ECM-style grace with New Orleans humidity that comes with the album too.

Crescent City Grass

Bluegrass bands are as rare in New Orleans as high ground, so the Jazz Fest debut of the **High Ground Drifters** was an opening-day surprise. The quintet come from the town's Mid-City neighborhood but shuffled covers (Bill Monroe, Django Reinhardt) and originals ("Hellbender," "Jack 'n the Bull") with plenty of Kentucky in the bravado and no slack. Get more of those good times on *The High Ground Drifters*, the group's self-released first album.