

Arts

Mighty Sam sets sights on elusive brass ring

New Orleans—stretching lazily between the Mississippi River and Lake Borgne on the south and Lake Pontchartrain on the north, about 75 miles east-southeast of Baton Rouge—is a classic case of geography affecting patterns of perception. They call it "The Big Easy." It is the birth place of Jelly Roll Morton, Mahalia Jackson and Louis Armstrong. It is also the home of gumbo, Vieux Carre, Mardi Gras, and Mighty Sam McClain, a Blues singer who was born on April 15, 1943, in the North Louisiana town of Monroe.

McClain conspires in the long, sprawling tradition of The Big Easy. Like his predecessors, he sings impassioned tunes that tell stories of unrequited love, conspicuous relationships and two-timing lovers. His voice, however, has a bold intensity that is a perfect adjunct to the electric preference of contemporary urban life.

He and his band Soul Purpose breezed into Toronto for a recent engagement at The Brunswick House, wearing 1960s wide-lapel, iridescent suits and cummerbunds. (Mighty Sam also sported a yachtsman's cap, violating a tacit taboo of TO fashion.) Passers through might have mistaken the band members for a tacky lounge act had it not been for the inspired music emanating from the stage.

Soul Purpose, I am told, was formed by McClain and ex-Brownsville guitarist Dick Billy in 1984, as a group and a philosophy of life. "Everyone should have a purpose in life," Mighty Sam explained recently. "I like to have fun and make money. But I really believe that God put me on earth to sing and make music."

At this point in time, the attire of Soul Purpose reflects the fact that despite their inspired music, they still

have to scuffle for gigs and money to keep on going.

Although those in the know consider Mighty Sam the equal of Bobby Blank or Little Milton, he remains a sadly underrated singer. He managed a few mild hits out of his 12 single releases in the late '60s. But after becoming disenchanted with the record business and his status as a "minor league" artist, Mighty Sam dropped out of music altogether. It is only now, after a decade of musical inactivity, that one of North America's toughest R&B singers is in the process of rejuvenating his once-promising career.

Now 44, McClain has been singing and making music since his mother brought him to a Baptist church, in Monroe. She started a small gospel singing group there, giving Sam his first taste of singing at the age of five. Inevitably, Sam's interest in Blues surfaced while in grade school. "My momma was totally against it. I used to get run out of the house for singing the Blues," he recalls. "But every chance I got, whether it was in the cotton field or washing dishes, I was singing the Blues—as long as my mother wasn't around."

By the time Sam reached his teens, he dropped out of school to valet for Little Melvin, who lead a local R&B group. "Totin instruments," he laughs. But when Melvin's singer quit suddenly before a job, McClain was instantly promoted to vocalist.

With McClain in tow, Little Melvin's Revue became a popular attraction throughout northern Louisiana and Mississippi until 1963. "We were doing all the old Blues stuff like 'Woke Up This Morning' and 'Doggin' Around'," says Sam. "We were staying alive. Some days you made it, some days you didn't. But it was fun. That was the way things were in those days."

When Little Melvin dissolved his band in 1963 to join Otis Redding,

McClain took a job singing with the Dothan Sextet in Pensacola, Florida. The band worked along the Gulf Coast primarily on military bases or in clubs that catered to servicemen. Sam left the sextet after three years to join the Rounders, the house band at the 506 Club, Pensacola's hottest nightclub.

In the years that followed Sam was signed with a number of record companies from Muscle Shoals to Nashville. And after many failed attempts to crack the commercial success barrier with various single releases, such as "Sweet Dreams" and "Mr. and Mrs. Untrue," Sam found himself back home in Monroe in the fall of 1982 "trying to get it together."

Things in Monroe didn't work out either and on October 14, 1982, he headed for New Orleans completely broke. "It was rough at first," he says. "I had to sleep out of doors the first couple of nights. I remembered a place on Bourbon Street from the old days, the 544 Club. I went there to see what was happening and

Mason Ruffner's band was playing. He let me sit in for a couple of numbers, and his drummer, Kerry Brown, was really knocked out by my voice. He told me he was starting his own band, Brownsville, and wanted me to sing with him."

Just when things started looking up for McClain—he signed a recording/management pact with a local producer, Carlo Ditto, and was even awarded a \$2000 artist fellowship by the Jazz and Heritage Festival Foundation—Brownsville split up, leaving Sam without a band. The contract he had signed yielded only one single, "Pray," which did little for him except compound his frustration.

In 1987, however, McClain is back with Soul Purpose to take yet another shot at the elusive brass ring. "I really think Blues is on a comeback," declares McClain, in spite of all his setbacks. "The recent success of Z.Z. (Hill) and Solomon (Burke) is evidence of that. A couple of years ago radio stations wouldn't have

touched their records. I can see young white kids out there enjoying it, but also see middle-aged black people going back to the Blues again."

Mighty Sam McClain seems to epitomize the classic Blues lament: "If it wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all." The post-modern world is not quite primed and ready to give him his just deserts. Part of this, of course, is due to the heritage of The Big Easy. We were always a little too squeamish and delicate to enjoy crawfish gumbo, red-eyed beans and rice as food staples. And we post-moderns are only beginning to discover the virtue in the genuine, uncontrived musical excitement of contemporary Blues. On the other hand, it would seem that we have come full circle, and our world is now ripe for authenticity. Yet, be this as it may, Blues people will always find their own consolation in song. And as the song goes: "You can't spend what you ain't got, and you can't lose what you never had."

ARTS CALENDAR

GALLERIES

Julio Barragan, 30 colourful oil paintings by the Argentine artist. Zack's Gallery (109 Stong), Mondays to Fridays 12-5.

Anna Diliddo and Marjoi Westera, a dual exhibition of the artists' works. IDA Gallery (102 Fine Arts Bldg.), Oct. 26-30.

Gretchen Sankey and Lois Anderson, a dual exhibition of the artists' works. IDA Gallery (102 Fine Arts Bldg.), until Oct. 23.

Gilda Mekler Paintings, acrylics on canvas by the artist. Winters Gallery (123 Winters), Oct. 27-Nov. 7.

MUSIC

Lunchtime Jazz, CHRY-FM (Radio York) presents **The Brendan David Quartet** in the Vanier Common Room, free of charge. Cash bar. Oct. 27 at noon.

Student Chamber Concerts, a varied programme with the students and ensembles of the Music Department. All welcome to McLaughlin Hall at noon on Oct. 30.

Blue Rodeo, a CHRY-sponsored band will play in the Grad Lounge, Oct. 26 & 27 at 8 p.m.

SEMINARS

Women and Art Seminar: Guest speaker is Joyce Wieland, a painter involved with film and the mixed media, who had the AGO's first career-long exhibit of a living Canadian woman. Lecture and discussion will take place in the Purple Lounge, 3rd Floor, Fine Arts Building from 12-1:30 on Oct. 27.

Creativity and Madness: On Friday, October 23 and Saturday, October 24, Atkinson College will be featuring a conference at Osgoode Hall's Moot Court. For registration information, call 736-5211 or visit the office of the Master at Room 258E Atkinson College.

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