

Dr. John - Locked Down (2012)

Written by bluesever

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01 – Locked Down 02 – Revolution 03 – Big Shot 04 – Ice Age 05 – Getaway 06 – Kingdom of Izzness [play](#) 07 – You Lie 08 – Eleggua [play](#) 09 – My Children, My Angels 10 – God's Sure Good Dr.

John - keyboards, lead vocals Dan Auerbach - guitar, percussion, background vocals
Max Weissenfeldt - drums, percussion, background vocals Leon Michels - keyboards, percussion, woodwinds, background vocals Nick Movshon - electric and upright bass, percussion, background vocals Brian Olive - guitar, percussion, woodwinds, background vocals The McCrary Sisters (Regina, Ann & Alfreda) - background vocals

It may come as a surprise that the character of Dr. John, whose new album, “Locked Down,” comes out Tuesday, was birthed in Los Angeles. The mythical voodoo pianist-conjurer is so intertwined with the stories, secrets and rituals of New Orleans that to suggest he is anything but the embodiment of the bayou borders on heresy.

But Dr. John — that is, the persona created by New Orleans singer, songwriter and pianist Malcolm John Michael Creaux “Mac” Rebennack — was imagined and realized in the entertainment capital of the world after the young pianist moved west to find work as a session player in 1965. It was here, after hooking up with a posse of fellow New Orleans musician expats and playing on some big L.A. hits of the era, that Rebennack started brainstorming a solo career and struck up the idea of a persona.

The one he came up with has endured for 45 years and has become a New Orleans archetype, so much so that his less inspired work over the decades has bordered on self-parody. His producers’ worst reflexes have been to highlight his New Orleans drawl, create funky rhythm, roll out a catchy melody on the piano, stir in some gumbo lyrics about second-line brass bands and then punctuate with horns.

But then, as if conjured out of the air, his new record, “Locked Down,” arrives, and it is one of the best of his career. As Bob Dylan did with “Time Out of Mind” and Tom Waits did last year with “Bad as Me,” Dr. John does here: exiting a period of relative creative stagnation by creating something magical, the embodiment of everything he’s done but pushed in a clear new direction.

Produced in Nashville by Dan Auerbach, singer and guitarist for the Black Keys, “Locked Down” reunites the man (Rebennack is now 71 years old) who was inspired by James Booker, Professor Longhair and Fats Domino with the abstract mystic Dr. John.

In his 1994 autobiography, “Under a Hoodoo Moon,” Rebennack describes that mystic as “a medicine man who claimed to be a prince of Senegal before he was abducted and taken to Cuba.”

He came up with the idea while living with a community of roustabouts in a Melrose Avenue building misleadingly called the Hollywood Executive Hotel and recorded Dr. John’s debut album, “Gris-Gris,” a swamp rock classic, at Gold Star Studios with off-hours studio time paid for by Sonny and Cher. This creation has endured through swamp rock gems such as “In the Right Place” and “Dr. John’s Gumbo,” both produced by New Orleans compadre Allen Toussaint, and has found remarkable rejuvenation on “Locked Down.”

This is due in no small part to Auerbach, who has merged the man with the myth by directing the project, compiling the band, playing guitar and setting a course.

As producer, Auerbach gathered the musicians, and what he came up with is stunning. Drummer Max Weissenfeldt, a drummer who has played with acts as varied as the Heliocentrics and the No Neck Blues Band and whose wild snare patterns propel songs from continent to continent with each measure, shines everywhere he hits. Horn arranger Leon Michels is the founder of the Truth & Soul label, has collaborated with both soul crooner Lee Fields and Wu-Tang Clan’s Raekwon; his brass bursts punctuate choruses and bridges. Bassist Nick Movshon’s roaming basslines are all over Amy Winehouse’s “Back to Black,” and guide songs with both grace and urgency.

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Rebennack cited West African instrumental music of the 1950s and '60s recommended by Auerbach as an influence on this record. It's especially noticeable on one of the album's most thrilling songs, "Revolution," which features a doubled-up baritone sax pushing forward a deep, driving melody that recalls Ethiopian Afro-jazz expert Mulatu Astatke, a humming organ solo by Rebennack that jumps around like a tripped-out Sun Ra freakout, and a wild but controlled drum excursion by Weissenfeldt.

Every instrumental break on "Locked Down," though, is as kaleidoscopic. In "Big Shot," the saxophone-heavy bridge arrives like a water balloon to the head, this big burst of joyous surprise. "Ain't no one ever gonna be like me," declares the doctor, and you've got no doubt that he's right. "I'm the big shot." (If David Chase were still making episodes of "The Sopranos," he'd no doubt have harnessed "Big Shot" for a bloodied murder scene involving Tony.)

Lyricaly, though, the mask has been taken off, and we see Rebennack not only as a Saturday night voodoo king but also as a Tuesday morning man waking up after a weekend bender and trying to come to terms with what went down over the last 72 hours. Especially on the album's closing numbers, the erstwhile Dr. John offers intimate, personal lyrics about the importance of family and the generosity of God. "God's been better to me than I've been to myself," he sings on the album's closer, and he sounds both repentant and amazed to make it out the other side. --- Randall Roberts, latimes.com

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