

ORLEANS BIOGRAPHY

Depth. A word used to describe sports teams who are multi-dimensional, movies that must be seen many times, art that continues to reveal hidden meaning. In the throw-away world of rock-and-roll bands, how often do you see real depth? Orleans at a recent performance at Epcot Center

Wells, John, Lance, Larry

Then again, how often do you come across a band like Orleans? Now celebrating their 30th anniversary together, Larry and Lance Hoppen and John Hall continue to demonstrate depth. From their earliest days as a bar band and college favorite in the Northeast, when Rolling Stone tagged them "best unrecorded band in America", to studio and live collaborations with Bonnie Raitt, Little Feat and Jackson Browne, to Top 40 success with mammoth hit singles, Orleans has defied industry pundits and career counselors by doing many different things well.

"Still The One", "Dance With Me" and "Love Takes Time" were their biggest hits (the first two rank over four million radio plays in the U.S. alone), but hard-core fans and critics were always more impressed by the live energy and adventuresome spirit they evidenced on stage. Now that spirit is captured on the new CD "Still The One - Live!" Seventeen tracks, all but one recorded in concert over the last thirty years, display the instrumental and vocal chops Orleans is renowned for. From the playful reggae of "Trenchtown Rock" (Bob Marley's Wailers asked for Orleans to be their opening act on an early Boston concert) to the fusion tour-de-force of "Compared To What" (learned from Les McCann when opening for him), to the glistening harmonies of "New Star Shining" (covered by Ricky Skaggs and James Taylor), to the sarcastic funk of Plastic Money (decrying the financial shenanigans that never seem to end), Orleans shows their depth. They write, play, sing, switch instruments, comment on life and society, and rock with abandon.

No one should be surprised at the musicianship. Larry and Lance are sons of two music teachers who met on a gig, and they both were playing in bands long before adulthood. They and John Hall were classically trained on keyboards, wind and brass instruments before gravitating toward guitar. So a calypso horn chart or complex vocal countermelody is as likely to appear as a blues guitar riff.

And no one should be taken aback at the social commentary. Nurtured by families that were devout and high-achieving, coming of age in the sixties and seventies, these boys thought they could change the world. Or at least they should try. Not only did they write songs about climate change, poverty, and war when the business would rather they just sing love songs, but they have rolled their sleeves up and done some of the grunt work themselves. Larry Hoppen's philanthropic work includes raising money for HIV-positive children, Lance Hoppen has worked with a Nashville-based group seeking alternatives to violence, and John Hall has been elected as a legislator and school board president in upstate New York.

And when they have time, they work on other people's records. Orleans may be the only American band to have sung on a number one Country record (Steve Wariner's "You Can Dream of Me", which John co-wrote) and a number one Jazz record (Michael Franks' "Dragonfly Summer"). Their influence can be felt as far as Bobby McFerrin, Chet Atkins and Earl Klugh (who all recorded "Dance With Me"), and Shania Twain (who recycled elements of Orleans' "Still The One" into her "You're Still The One").

Restless, the band has taken numerous sabbaticals over the years for solo projects, only to reunite with more depth and new inspiration. The new CD exudes that, and encourages it too. Orleans is working now on new songs for a studio album to be recorded next year. Rest assured it won't be pigeonholed easily. They never played in the shallow end of the pool; why start now?