

Papa Mali

BY MICHAEL HOINSKI

GRATEFUL DEAD LYRICIST Robert Hunter doesn't lend his verse to just anybody. So, after decades of working with Jerry Garcia—and with Bob Dylan on his most recent album—Hunter's selection of Papa Mali as the interpreter of his newest batch of songs is nothing short of knighting the 52-year-old, fifth-generation, Louisiana-raised musician.

"I have been writing songs with Robert Hunter," Papa declares, giving each word its own beat, as if to validate them. "This is a *huge* deal for me. I told my wife that I couldn't have been any more knocked out than if I had gotten lyrics from Neil Young. How can this be real?"

At the moment, Papa has prepared a delicious combo of jambalaya, buttered cabbage and rolls, that when washed down with a 22-ounce Heineken aids him in making sense of this reality. He's moving around his kitchen in an apron that reads "Bobby Blue Bland, The World's Greatest Blues Singer," and recounting a full-circle musical odyssey that began with his devotion to the Dead and has brought him into their inner sanctum.

It all started in Shreveport, where Papa, born Malcolm Welbourne, was weaned on everything from Wilson Pickett and Solomon Burke to Ernest Tubb and Ferlin Husky. By his early twenties, he was playing in a reggae band called The Killer Bees. It was then that he

acquired his nickname from Burning Spear's band—"Papa" because he was already a father of four (he's since added two more) and "Mali" because it's Jamaican for Malcolm.

During the last decade, he released two groove-oriented albums under that moniker. First was *Thunder Chicken*, a nod to classic blues, funk and New Orleans-style music, with grease-fried takes on Clifton Chenier's "Bon Ton Roulet," Buddy Guy and Junior Wells's "Man of Many Words" and Dr. John's "Walk on Guilded Splinters." Zigaboo Modeliste, drummer for The Meters, is said to have played the album 15 times in a row one Christmas Day. "In the years right after *Thunder Chicken*," Papa says, "a lot of serious cats started coming around."

Therein lies the difference between that album and its follow-up, *Do Your Thing*: on the latter Papa got to jam with his musical heroes, including Kirk Joseph of The Dirty Dozen Brass Band, Big Chief Monk Boudreaux of the Mardi Gras Indians and New Orleans piano legend Henry Butler. The album, glued together by the drumming of longtime Papa collaborator Robb Kidd, is traditional music filtered through a psych-rock prism.

That brings us to last year, when Papa played the Oregon Country Fair and the boyfriend of one of his ardent fans changed his career forever.

"I did my set and walked backstage," Papa says, "and there's [Grateful Dead drummer] Bill Kreutzmann, and he's like, 'What are you doing for the next couple of days?'"

Off they went for musical and spiritual bonding that eventually led them to Hunter. The lyricist began e-mailing songs to Papa a few months ago so that Papa could write the music to go along with them. The goal is to record an album of these songs with Kreutzmann as a project that is separate from their current groups.

"The only coaching that I got from Robert," Papa says, "was, 'Keep the melody simple. Don't try to oversell the chorus. Let the lyrics sell the chorus.' So he's basically given me total freedom to do whatever I want. And yet, I feel like I have this enormous responsibility to kind of keep a tradition alive."

Papa played some of the songs after dinner. "King Cotton Blues" is a meandering jaunter that could have been on Garcia's solo album *Garcia*. "The New Orleans Crawl" is a carefree bar anthem with the refrain "All for one and one for all, let's do the New Orleans Crawl." And "Louisiana Rain" is a cryptic ode replete with rain-like sound effects.

So far, Hunter has liked what he's heard of Papa's demos, so much so that he's written a song expressly for Papa.

"It's a great song," Papa says, "I've got my work cut out for me." ●



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