

Episode Title: Harry Connick Jr.'s Perfect Po' Boy

Episode Summary: In today's episode, Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of *Southern Living Magazine*, talks to Grammy and Emmy-award winning musician and actor Harry Connick Jr. about growing up in New Orleans, his new spiritual album, and how he and his daughter have shown their gratitude to essential workers across the country over the last year.

Episode Transcript:

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: Welcome to the Season 2 debut of *Biscuits & Jam* from *Southern Living*. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of *Southern Living Magazine*. If you missed our previous episodes, dig back into our archives for interviews with Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton, Gladys Knight and more.

To kick off our new season, I'm joined today by one of the most celebrated jazz musicians to ever emerge from the city of New Orleans. He's also been a longtime ambassador for the Crescent City, and that means he loves to talk about food.

HARRY CONNICK JR.: New Orleans is the only place I've ever been where they plan the next meal at the meal you're at then. You know, so if you have breakfast, people are like, what are we doing for lunch? You say, holy cow. So even now when I go visit New Orleans, I really have to pace myself because, you know, there's just access to so much good food.

Voice Over from SID EVANS: A star of music, television, film, and Broadway, Harry Connick Jr. trained under legendary pianist Ellis Marsalis and became a household name in the 90's with crossover hit songs like "It Had to Be You." A winner of multiple Grammys and Emmys, he's starred in such films as *Hope Floats* and *New In Town*, and on television's *Will & Grace* and *American Idol*.

In 2005, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Harry led the fundraising charge to get New Orleans back on its feet, helping to organize a national telethon and becoming an honorary chair of Habitat For Humanity.

On today's show, Harry discusses his new album *Alone with My Faith*, a very personal gospel record that speaks directly to the struggles we've all been through over the past year.

HARRY CONNICK JR.: it was exactly what I was feeling, at the time. There's really not a lot of poetry there. There's not a lot of hidden meaning. It's just like, I got to count on my faith to get me through this.

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Plus Harry's perfect po' boy and much more on our Season 2 premiere of Biscuits & Jam.*

(Theme music fades out)

SID EVANS: Well, Harry Connick, Jr., welcome to Biscuits & Jam.

HARRY CONNICK JR.: Man. I like the title. I didn't even need to know what the show was about. You say Biscuits and Jam and I'll show up.

SID EVANS: Well, it's great to have you here, so, listen, I want to start off by asking you how you're supposed to pronounce New Orleans, because...

HARRY CONNICK JR.: You got it. You got it.

SID EVANS: There's a lot of confusion about this.

HARRY CONNICK JR.: You got it. Well, here's what the interesting thing is. Most people from New Orleans say it, like you said, New Orleans. But there are some old school people in New Orleans who even say New Or-LEANS, like, um, um, like the song says, do you know what it means to miss New Or-LEANS? Um, I can tell you what people don't say is *Nawlands*. That's just not something that the locals say. I think people from out of state, you know, may say that, but not not folks from there. It's always, uh, New Orleans.

SID EVANS: All right. Well, we just had to clear that up. So when I think of your hometown, there are two things that they clearly do better than any place in the world, and that's food and music. I'm going to get to music but was food an important part of your life growing up?

HARRY CONNICK JR.: It was a huge part without my even knowing it. I remember coming home from school and on the days that my dad might have been home early or on a weekend, you know, he'd have a dozen crabs that he would be picking the meat out of so he can make gumbo or, we would normally eat things like red beans or shrimp remoulade or po' boys. I mean, that's just what we grew up with. And so it wasn't until I moved out to New Orleans that I realized that it's not that food was worse in other places. I, I just don't think it was as culturally important as it is in New Orleans. I mean, New Orleans is the only place I've ever been where they plan the next meal at the meal you're at then. You know, so if you have breakfast, people are like, what are we doing for lunch? You say, holy cow. So even now when I go visit New Orleans, I really have to pace myself because, you know, there's just access to so much good food.

SID EVANS: Yeah. It just never stops. so what's your favorite place to get a po' boy and, uh, what's your typical order?

HARRY CONNICK JR.: There's a restaurant down there called Mandina's, it's been there forever. It got kind of wrecked after Katrina, but it reopened and it's right there in a section of town called Midcity. It's on Canal Street. Not really in the downtown area, but if you travel away from downtown about eight, ten minutes, you'll see it.

And I love their po' boys. They make them on French bread. They usually butter the French bread. And then it has like, uh, I like the fried oyster po' boys. And, um, for your listeners who may not know, they—you say, dressed. You know, I want a fried oyster po', po' boy dressed, which is basically everything on it; lettuce and tomatoes and mayonnaise and pickles and all that stuff. So I love those, uh, I love the, fried shrimp po' boys. They have a po' boy at Mother's called the debris po' boy. And after they cook that meat down, it turns into debris, really just kind of juice and a bunch of little pieces. And I love a roast beef debris po' boy dressed. That's, that's a good order to make at Mother's.

SID EVANS: All right. That's a good recommendation. I've had that po' boy and I can tell you that is—that's one to go back for. So Harry, when someone asks you where to go eat New Orleans, which has got to happen a lot, what's kind of on your short list?

HARRY CONNICK JR.: There's a bunch of places. Uh, there's a place across the river called Mosca's, which is a family owned Italian restaurant, which you can get an amazing crab salad. They have great, you know, baked chicken., I like going to this local restaurant in Lakeview called The Steak Knife. It's just a steakhouse. But, there's great food there. Restaurants like Brennan's are known for their turtle soup. You know, it's interesting? When I go to New Orleans, I don't really go all out for New Orleans food because my dad is 94, he will make that for me. Like, if I'm really craving red beans or gumbo, he'll probably make that. So there's like an Asian restaurant called LUVI down there that I really, really dig. There's New Orleans influence there.

Oh, I love, uh, Surrey's for breakfast. They'll give you some shrimp and grits or, any kind of New Orleans breakfast. It's ridiculous. It's really good.

(Instrumental music break)

SID EVANS: So your dad was pretty busy. I mean, he was district attorney for about 30 years. I know your mom was a judge. Did they have time to cook? Did they love cooking when you were a kid?

HARRY CONNICK JR.: Well, my father really was the cook in the family. My dad was the one who made us red beans or, uh, gumbo. He made a great seafood gumbo. My father's chief investigator was a guy named Ray Comstock, who was a real outdoorsman and, um, taught me a lot about cooking. He, he was an incredible cook. So he's the guy who kind of taught me how to boil crawfish. The way he made venison or the way he made his roux, things like that. So I learned a lot from him, um, but my dad was really a good cook.

SID EVANS: So, Harry, what were the holidays like in your house? I mean, you know, you're known for some of your Christmas albums which have sold better than just about any Christmas album out there. Clearly means a lot to you. What were the holidays like, uh, growing up? Was that a big deal?

HARRY CONNICK JR.: Well, it was a big deal because, you know, my father is Catholic, and so growing up, celebrating Christmas is a big deal. It was exciting when we got to go to midnight mass, that didn't happen a lot when we were kids. That was fun. We go to church normally on Christmas Day, and we were lucky, you know, that we had a couple of presents to open. And yeah, it was nice. Pretty traditional. Nothing, nothing really particularly New Orleans-ish about it. We didn't really have, you know, a giant Christmas dinner. Now, the guy I just mentioned, Ray Comstock, the guy I called my Uncle Ray, this guy would—man, he cooks so much food. I mean, you go to his house and he'd make it like just for me and my friends sometimes. He would make, you know, turkey sausage gumbo and seafood gumbo. He'll cook a whole ham. He'll deep fry turkey, you know, he'll make jambalaya. He'll...I mean, holy cow. He made so much food. So, uh, the holidays for him were really big.

SID EVANS: Well, I want to turn to music for a minute. And, I want to ask you about the legendary musician Ellis Marsalis, who you studied with growing up. And this is the father of Branford and Wynton Marsalis and he passed away last year. And that must have been very hard news for you.

HARRY CONNICK JR.: It was tough. It happened so quickly. I mean, we knew that, you know, Ellis was suffering from some health issues for, for a while. Uh, but I think it was maybe a week from the time he contracted COVID to when he died., and that took us all, you know, back., you know, it's funny. Ellis was one of those guys, or was one of those guys that was such a part of our lives, such an institution, that it really did not seem real when he died. As a matter of fact, it hit me months later, uh, when I was having dinner with my family, and I started to weep. And they said, what's wrong? I said, I—you know, it's hitting me that we lost Ellis. And because he's just like...omnipresent. I mean, even when you're not around him, you know, if you studied with him, he has such an influence on you. Uh, and he was just an incredible educator and, um,

unique personality. You know? And was a real taskmaster with us and was absolutely adamant about our developing craft and discipline and going about things the right way but the flipside of that is his presence was so powerful that we continue to honor him. And, and, you know, we have the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music down there in New Orleans, right in the heart of the musician's village, which is something that I started with his son, Branford. So he's still very much a part of our lives, which is a good thing.

SID EVANS: I'm wondering if you can kind of paint a picture for me of when you would go and take lessons with him. I mean, what was, what was the room...

HARRY CONNICK JR.: Let's say it's not a pretty picture. So I'll, I'll tell you what it was like. There were two circumstances. One was when I went to his house for a private lesson. The other one was every day when we studied with him in class at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. That was intimidating and scary. But going to his house was like, so if Wynton and Branford were there, it was awful because they would push me around and tease me. And you have to realize that these are just two older guys. They're about six, seven years older than me, just pushing me around as a 15-year-old. It's Wynton Marsalis and Branford Marsalis, two the great musical minds of all time. And if I made it past them into the house, I would go into Ellis' living room and he'd probably be sitting at the piano with sheet music sprawled out all over the top, you know, with orchestrations he was writing and, you know, practicing. And it couldn't be more intimidating because you knew he was listening. And you know that sometimes Wynton and Branford were there listening and it was just awful. It was, it was a nightmare. It was so scary. Um, and if you can make it through that? You know, it's funny, Sid, is when I did *American Idol*, a lot of the, a lot of the people— the consensus was that I was really tough on the kids and I would always laugh. I said, “y'all have no idea.”

Because I would say to those kids, you know, you're singing out of tune. You may want to concentrate on your intonation. I mean, Ellis would say things like, you should consider another vocation. You should maybe think about dedicating your life to something else. So no, that—you know, yeah, he was—but he was the best, man. I wouldn't, I wouldn't trade that in for anything.

SID EVANS: Well, Harry, I don't want to, dwell on negative things at all, but, you know, you also lost someone else important to you this year. And that was a priest named Richard Guastella. And I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit about him and the impact that he had on you?

HARRY CONNICK JR.: Sure. Well, Father Richard—I smile when I say his name, I think about him a lot. When I first moved to New York, I was 18. This was in 1986 and I lived at the 92nd Street Y on the, in Lexington on the Upper East Side. Well, I was looking for a church to go to, because I wanted to continue going to mass on Sunday and there was a church about two blocks away

called Our Lady of Victory. Well, to be quite honest with you, I was looking as much for a church to attend as I was a place of employment because I was completely broke. I mean, I had no money. My dad was paying my rent for the first year. And I wanted to see if the church needed an organist or pianist to play during Mass because, I mean, I needed any kind of money I could find. So I went in, I met Father Richard. I said, "Father, I'm a, you know, musician. I can play piano during the mass." He said, "that's great. We'll pay you twenty five bucks, you know, and you play these two masses in the morning." And that's a lot of ramen noodles. I mean, \$25 can buy you a week's worth of ramen noodles. So I would play the mass and I'll never forget this. I would go back into the rectory and he would go after mass and he would go into his apartment and, you know, get out of his priest clothes and put on jeans and a shirt. And, and he would almost every week, he would walk me across the street and buy me a hamburger. And I can see it like it's right now. I would sit across the table from him and, and I would ask him questions. I would, I would get advice from him. Um, just I didn't really have a lot of friends in New York. And he was just incredibly kind.

HARRY CONNICK JR.: Um, he was, he was, had a great sense of humor, but he was a serious guy. And it was a kind of presence that, that I really needed. Um, and he was acting to me the way a priest should act. You know, somebody who helps guide you and was a great source of, comfort in uncertain times. Cut to years later, I met my wife. It was time to get married. I wanted to get married in the Catholic Church and I call Father Richard. And I said, Father, would you marry us? So he came down in New Orleans and, man, it was just—it was great. And I found out last year, you know, he got COVID and died, uh, fairly quickly, too. So, you know, it's, it's a tough, tough time. But, you know, I feel so, so lucky to have known these incredible people.

(Instrumental music fades in...)

Voice Over from Sid Evans: We'll be back with more from Harry Connick Jr., after the break.

BREAK

(Instrumental music fades out...)

Voice Over from Sid Evans: Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of Southern Living Magazine. Harry Connick Jr.'s new album is called Alone With My Faith, and I asked him if he feels the record is a tribute, in a way, to the two men we discussed before the break—Ellis Marsalis and Father Richard Guastella—who had such an impact on his life.

HARRY CONNICK JR.: That's such a great question. And I think the honest answer is indirectly, yes. Um, the influence that Ellis had on me as a musician is ever present. So I would say almost

anything that I do musically has his stamp on it. The man that I have become and that I continue to try to be, which is, you know, better and more humble, a better father, better husband. Those types of things, Father Richard had a big influence in me on. To be able to draw upon my faith in a time like this when I think any of your listeners who, uh, happen to subscribe to the notion of faith, I think we all share this common experience. And, those were two of the people who were huge impacts on my life that got me to the point, where I could make a record like this, musically and spiritually. So, yeah, I think their marks are on it, as well.

SID EVANS: Well, the first words of the title track are, "My life has changed, my world is uncertain. Everything's strange, everything's new." I'm wondering if those were the thoughts that were really on your mind when you sat down to record it?

HARRY CONNICK JR.: 100 percent. I remember looking at the news and thinking, what the hell is happening here. Not only with COVID, but with everything else. And this has nothing to do with political affiliation. This just has to do with, you know, as an American citizen, what is happening right now? Where are we going? How long is this going to last? Um, you know, I think no matter what your political belief is, you can't deny that there's this, you know, toxic vitriol that's kind of consumed our country. What's really crazy is that a dear friend of mine, um, has dealt with blood cancer for for years and years. And she was literally on her deathbed when we just finished mastering this album. And, um, I wanted to do something for her. And I don't like to say what can I do for you when somebody's sick, I just try to make it a habit to just do something. But I didn't know what to do because I knew she couldn't eat, you know, and she and she was bedridden and had made it out of a 13-hour surgery. It was just an awful thing. It was very touch and go. So I got a piece of staff paper and I wrote out, alone with my faith, to give it to her as a gift, you know? And I'm saying, you know, my world has changed, but, you know, whatever the lyrics are and I felt like I was writing her experience, you know? And she got it. She appreciated it. But it was exactly what I was feeling, at the time. There's really not a lot of poetry there. There's not a lot of hidden meaning. It's just like, I got to count on my faith to get me through this. Yeah It was very much a snapshot of what I was feeling in real time.

SID EVANS: So there's a mix of traditional spirituals and then some songs that you wrote on this album, was there one song that this all kind of started with? Was it that song? Or was there another one.

HARRY CONNICK JR.: That was the last song. Because I hadn't written that song. I recorded about 18 songs and I sent them to my manager—to answer your question, I can't remember what the first one was. Um, maybe it was, "Thank You for Waiting for Me," which I wrote kind of as a response to the George Floyd protests, because everyone was commenting on social media about being aware, and I'm thinking to myself, like, I don't want to feel compelled to write

something. I feel like I've lived—I have a lived experience. I don't want to feel like I have to write something. But not writing something or commenting in some way would have been complicit, maybe—or not complicit, but it would have been glaringly obvious that I was not participating in the national dialogue. So I thought very carefully about what I was going to write. And I wrote this. "If I listen, really listen, I'll hear. If I look, really look, I'll see. If I pray, really pray, I can try to understand." And I wrote that on my Instagram and then I'm like, wait. That's also me talking to God. So thank you for waiting for me, because I'm a screw up and I'm a mess and that's how that song came to be.

But anyway, I recorded about 18 songs, whatever. I sent them to my manager, as I always do. I said, here's my new record. And she says, "this is an album about faith." I said, "yeah, pretty much." She says, "You should call it *Alone with My Faith*," which is not something she normally does. She does not kind of get involved in the creative side of things. I said, "I love that title." I wrote the song that day. I recorded it. And that kind of became the, the song that seemed like the best song for the title track.

SID EVANS: So Harry, about a year ago, you started a series called *Hunker Down with Harry*, which was a YouTube series. And I think you started it in March or so, when all this got under way. I'm just wondering what inspired that idea and what you got out of it?

HARRY CONNICK JR.: Well, part of it was selfishly, I needed to connect with people. And even though I was in my house and there was nobody here, I felt that speaking through the camera was connecting me with people who were going through the same thing. That's the interesting thing to me about this pandemic is that if, if you, Sid, have a tragedy in your family, you know, I can pray for you and, and try to empathize, but I can't quite experience it from your point of view and vice versa. But this pandemic is something that we all share almost identically. I mean, I think we all know people who have been sick or died or had to, lose their jobs or whatever it is. And I just wanted to talk to folks about it and maybe offer them some diversion, some comfort, you know, some humor, a little bit of music just because—I don't know, maybe I felt that it was helping me, too. So it just seemed like, it seemed like something that was fun to do. So I did about 10 episodes and I enjoyed doing it.

SID EVANS: Well, and you worked with your daughters on it, which must have been fun.

HARRY CONNICK JR.: Oh, was awesome. So Georgia's a photographer. Um, she's a videographer and editor...a director. So she's fantastic to work with because she really knows what she's doing and she has incredible, creative insight. My second daughter, Kate, um, is one of these multi-talented folks who's having trouble pinning down exactly what she wants to do. She's a clothing designer. She's kind of an on-air personality. She loves to sing. And Charlotte, the

18-year-old, is probably going to be president one day. She's, you know, just a brilliant, artistically-minded young woman. So they were all involved in the, in the show. Um, and—yeah. It was just really cool, really, really cool for me to be able to have some fun with them like that.

SID EVANS: Well, so on the first episode of that show, you sang, "That Old Rugged Cross". And I was just wondering if there was a seed of the new album in that?

HARRY CONNICK JR.: No, because I would sing that on all my shows just out of the blue just because I love that song. Um, and I thought it might have been appropriate to sing on *Hunkered Down with Harry*. And then when the album came, it's just kind of at the top of my mind in terms of like name your five favorite gospel songs. That would be one of them. And so that's probably why I put it on there. But I think the need to singing on that show and the need to sing it on the album were synonymous because I, I actually benefited from singing them. You know what I'm saying? That doesn't always happen. I don't know about you, but if you say a prayer or, or sing a song that you sing all the time, every once in a while, a new meaning will pop up in your brain, even if you sang it a thousand times. And, um, and that happened with that song. You know, it's just when you dissect every word, it's like— "Well, actually, I can use a little bit of this right now." So that's why I did the album, because I thought, you know, maybe some other folks could use it, too.

SID EVANS: So, Harry, would you sing just a verse of that for us?

HARRY CONNICK JR.: Now? Oh, you want...

SID EVANS: Yeah?

HARRY CONNICK JR.: I think I would—people would return my albums if I sang it now. I've been talking all morning and I'll sing one line. (Singing) "I will cling to the old rugged cross and exchange it some day for a crown."

I apologize. That's a tired voice.

SID EVANS: Oh, are you kidding me? That sounds fantastic.

HARRY CONNICK JR.: What would you do if I had done like—what would you do if you done like, what would you do if I had—it had been like—OK, hold on one second. [clears throat, sings in a high voice]

And we got into—and we finally, like, you started doing some real hardcore fast ball investigative journalism and found out that my entire career has been a fraud the whole time?

SID EVANS: Well, you know, we're out to—we're out to, you know, make those kind of big discoveries on Biscuits and Jam.

(Music break)

SID EVANS: Harry, I wanted to ask you about, uh, this tribute that you did, um, to essential workers called, "United We Sing," where you traveled with your daughter, Georgia, from New York down to New Orleans. And I was just wondering if there was a moment on that trip that stood out?

HARRY CONNICK JR.: You know, so here's the deal. I'm sitting at home in March with my family and, I can't do anything. I was fortunate enough to be able to stay home, but I couldn't, you know, I'm an entertainer. So I'm like, well, maybe I can entertain, maybe that'll help some people. So I came up with this idea, I pitched it to CBS. They liked the idea. And, basically, it was Georgia and I driving from Connecticut to New Orleans stopping along the way and personally thanking essential workers, whether they were hospital cleaning staff or the fire department or public transportation or whatever, you know, garbage collectors. Anybody who was doing things to make our lives easier. And the idea was to have a celebrity on an iPad. And when I said, uh, Mr. Smith, I want to thank you so much, because you pick up our trash. You know, you're risking your life every day going out into this COVID world. I just want to say thanks. And also Brad Pitt wants to say thanks. And Brad Pitt would be on the iPad and they would talk. Or Oprah, or Jamie Fox, or Sandra Bullock, or Renee Zellweger, or whoever it was. I guess it was every time I stopped, like the hospital workers in Birmingham, Alabama. These were the hospital cleaning staff. When I first started developing the idea, some folks in the executive department were kind of getting me talking to hospital executives and stuff. I said, no, no, no, I want to talk to the people who were in the trenches. And you talk to these men and women and they have children at home and they're cleaning the hospital, all of it, the restrooms, the kitchen, the halls, the rooms. And, they said this is—this what we do. We go home, we put our clothes in the washing machine, we shower, and every time that happened, it just, you know, I would get back on the RV and Georgia and I would just be quiet for a little while, thinking like, holy cow, we're lucky to meet these folks. And it was amazing as a father to see Georgia meet these people and put faces with their names and their occupations because she was just humbled by it. And it was profound for, for both of us.

SID EVANS: Hmm. Yeah. Well, we're also appreciative that you did that. And, uh, I know that all the essential workers were too. So thank you for that.

Harry, last question. What's the last great thing you made for dinner?

HARRY CONNICK JR.: Last night! I made...OK, so here's what I did. Now, listen. You've got a lot of Southern listeners, I don't know if they're going to go for this, OK? Because this is—there's no oil, there's no flour, there's no sugar. I got to branch out a little bit, so here's what I did. I took about four pounds of spinach and I, and I held it over, boiling, boiling water. And I dipped the stems in the water for about 10 seconds. And then I boiled it for about a minute.

I put the spinach in an ice bath. I squeezed it out, and then I added, toasted sesame oil, toasted sesame seeds, soy sauce, a little salt, and I put it on a cutting board and I kind of chopped it into bite sized pieces. And I put it over rice. It's, it's like a Korean spinach thing that I saw online? Man, we devoured it. I mean, four pounds of spinach. We ate that so fast. It was good. It was good.

Because the last time I was in New Orleans, I stayed at my dad's house with my girls. It was a giant Ram Dass' King cake there. And I looked at the girls. I said, I'm not going there. Are you? They're like, heck no. No, we were not doing it. Two days later, that king cake was gone. We went through that thing so fast...I think somebody even swallowed the baby and didn't realize it. That's how fast we ate it.

And by the way, after this broadcast is over, please explain to your listeners what swallowing a baby means because if, you know, if you're not from that area— like “Did Harry Connick just admit to swallowing a child?”

SID EVANS: I think the *Southern Living* crowd knows what you're talking about.

HARRY CONNICK JR.: Yeah, of course they do.

SID EVANS: Well, Harry Connick, Jr., thank you so much for being on Biscuits and Jam.

HARRY CONNICK JR.: My pleasure. Great talking to you, Sid.

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: Thanks for listening to my conversation with Harry Connick Jr. His new album *Alone With My Faith* is available wherever you get music.

Southern Living is based in Birmingham, Alabama, and this podcast was produced and edited in Nashville, Tennessee. If you like what you hear, please consider leaving us a review on Apple Podcasts or telling your friends about the program. You can find us online at southernliving.com, and subscribe to our print publication by searching for Southern Living at www.magazine.store.

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We'll see you back here next week for more Biscuits & Jam!