

Episode Title: Jon Batiste's Red Beans & Rice

Episode Summary: On today's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of *Southern Living* Magazine chats with Oscar-nominated musician Jon Batiste -- band leader on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* -- about his work on the animated film *Soul*, his friendships with Stevie Wonder and Mavis Staples, and growing up in Kenner, Louisiana. Plus, how his faith drives his creativity, and the meaning behind his new album *We Are*.

Episode Transcript:

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

Voice Over from SID EVANS: Welcome to *Biscuits and Jam*, from *Southern Living*. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of *Southern Living* Magazine. My guest today has been on the world stage for most of his life—from performing at Carnegie Hall to being recognized at this year's Academy Awards. But as we'll hear today, he still dreams of Monday nights at his parents' house for red beans and rice.

JON BATISTE: Sometimes it's just a family. Other times people drop by a couple of minutes before. There's always something left in the pot though. And, uh, it's just—it feels very much like a low key affair that anybody can be comfortable at, whether you're a king or whether you're just regular old Joe from up the block.

Voice Over from SID EVANS: Music is a birthright for Jon Batiste: Members of his family have performed in both the Treme and Olympia Brass Bands in New Orleans, and by the time he was 20, Jon's piano talents had him touring Spain, Paris and South Africa. Jon has been the bandleader for CBS' *Late Show with Stephen Colbert* since 2015, and his musical range and abilities have allowed him to perform with everyone from Prince to Willie Nelson. Still, this past year has been Jon's busiest yet -- with both a new album titled *We Are*, and his score for the Disney-Pixar film *Soul*, which recently garnered him an Oscar nomination. Songs like this one, "Born To Play," give the film an authenticity that could only come from a guy steeped in New Orleans' jazz tradition. As Jon told me, the music is essentially another character in the story.

(Jon Batiste's "Born to Play" from the Soul score plays)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: On today's show, Jon tells me how his faith has driven his creativity, and how his new album speaks to our current times.

JON BATISTE: The deeper you go on the inside, hopefully, the more timeless and the more relevant the messaging will be. You talk about hymns, that's what makes hymns so powerful. You know, they can apply to you in any time in your life. Think about "Amazing Grace". Those songs weren't written for a specific moment, but the depth of them applies to all moments.

Voice Over from SID EVANS: Plus his friendships with Stevie Wonder and Mavis Staples, and much more this week on Biscuits & Jam.

(Theme music ends)

SID EVANS: Well, Jon Batiste, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

JON BATISTE: It's a pleasure to be here, and you know what? I love biscuits and jam any time of the morning.

SID EVANS: Well, who doesn't?

JON BATISTE: That's right.

SID EVANS: Well, Jon, before we do anything, I've just got to tell you that I loved that movie *Soul* and I love the music in it. And I want to say congrats on your Oscar nomination.

JON BATISTE: Thank you so much. It's a blessing to really have been a part of such an amazing collaboration. I mean, it was really two years of creative bliss. We really wanted to make the music a character in the film, and when you watch the film, the music should feel like a familiar presence, not just a backdrop.

SID EVANS: Yeah, yeah. Well, it—that comes through loud and clear.

JON BATISTE: Oh, that's great to hear. I'm glad that the movie has resonated with so many people. Needless to say, after 2020, a lot of folks were feeling, you know, all sorts of ways of being isolated and everything that was going on in the world.

SID EVANS: Well, it couldn't have come at a better time. I think, when a lot of people were struggling and kind of searching for answers, I think that had a lot to do with what resonated in such a big way.

JON BATISTE: Yeah, man. That's the old Southern hospitality that I know so well.

SID EVANS: [laughs]

JON BATISTE: You got to make people feel good in their own skin.

SID EVANS: Well, let's talk about that, you grew up in Kenner, Louisiana, um, which is right by New Orleans and, and kind of sandwiched between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, I believe.

JON BATISTE: Mm-hmm.

SID EVANS: Um, can you tell me a little bit about your hometown?

JON BATISTE: Yes, indeed. You know, there's old Kenner and there's new Kenner. [laughs]. And I grew up between both. When we say old Kenner, we mean the part of Kenner that is by the railroad tracks, Bunch Village, is pretty much as rural as you could get in a city environment. And you have a few schools, a lot of great churches, strong Catholic tradition and beautiful, lovely little ravines and canals. Then you go to New Kenner, and that's a little bit more of a suburb. And when I

was a teenager, we moved there and I had a great time just playing basketball with my friends; a pretty suburban lifestyle that was broken up by going to New Orleans and playing with some of the greatest musicians of all time. So just kind of the balancing of those poles of existence was quite healthy for me.

SID EVANS: Well, it sure it sure was, and, uh, clearly it had a big impact on you.

JON BATISTE: Oh, for sure. Having a place to go back to, like Kenner just felt like such a warm hug after these experiences in New Orleans that I would have as a kid, where I would just be so excited and have so many ideas about music that were forming. I really do love my upbringing and I'm very happy that I had this blessed fortune to be born there.

(Instrumental music break)

SID EVANS: So, Jon, people in Louisiana take a lot of pride in their food and I'm wondering if there were places or dishes that Kenner was really known for.

JON BATISTE: So if you came to my mother's house, her red beans and rice recipe? Legendary. I mean, I'll tell you what, so many folks came to her house in Kenner for the red beans and rice on Monday nights. And I even showed that recipe to a few friends of mine and one of my friends, Nathaniel Rateliff, he decided that he wanted to put it in a cookbook that he just put out.

SID EVANS: Oh, no kidding.

JON BATISTE: Yeah, man. Nathaniel is an incredible musician, singer and...

SID EVANS: Yeah.

JON BATISTE: And, uh, and even Trombone Shorty. I remember when we were kids growing up, he would come over to the house for the red beans and rice recipe. I always told my mom that we should get at least some small restaurant or something out there in Kenner because that recipe is so legendary among those of us in the neighborhood.

SID EVANS: So can you paint a picture for me of like Monday night at the Batiste house on red beans and rice night?

JON BATISTE: Oh, it's very, very low key. Probably have some music going on or our favorite television show, whatever era of time it is, because he's talking about the nineties, early two thousands and, um, really just thinking about what happened with the Saints the night before and, uh, and you know, either mourning that or still celebrating that, and calling up folks to see if they want to come by for a last minute play. You know, sometimes it's just a family. Other times people drop by a couple of minutes before. There's always something left in the pot though. It feels very much like a low key affair that anybody can be comfortable at, whether you are king or whether you're just regular old Joe from up the block.

SID EVANS: Well, I love the idea of you and Trombone Shorty sitting down to some red beans and rice at the same table.

JON BATISTE: You know, it's funny, that was a tradition that, uh, even when I moved to New York, in fact, when I joined the Colbert Show and Stephen and I became friends, the first thing we did

was, uh, I invited him to the house and he, uh, came over and had my mom's red beans and rice. So, I mean, I'm still inviting folks over to the house, man.

SID EVANS: Oh, that's beautiful. Well, you grew up in a very musical family, to say the least. Uh, what were the holidays like in the Batiste house? I've got to imagine there was a lot of music.

JON BATISTE: Oh, my goodness, you know, I have, again, the blessed fortune of being born into this musical dynasty of New Orleans music and my father being my first musical mentor. When I was growing up, he was my teacher. You know, he would tell me to listen to this or he would tell me that this is something that I might be interested in reading or checking out. Same goes for my mother, who was very intellectual in her pursuits. Although they weren't music, they would inform the music. So she would tell me to check out this or that. And, eventually I would be at my grandmother's house. And this is my uh, grandmother on my father's side. And this is during the summers where we would go there. My cousins, we formed a junior band. Travis and Jamal, we would play video games half of the day and the other half of the day we play the soundtrack and the score music from the video games, in the music room at my grandmother's house. And this is the same music room that my dad, when he was that age, a kid and younger, would rehearse with his brothers and my uncles. So you can imagine just that house on Elm Street in Bunch Village, Old Kenner. You know, just the history of what happened in that band room and me growing up and, and going through that as well. It was—it felt like a rite of passage.

SID EVANS: Yeah. You know, there's so much spirituality in your music, and I'm just wondering, was the church a big part of your upbringing?

JON BATISTE: Every Sunday. The church and my faith in general is behind all the music that I make, and I think that that is something that people feel. And it's a good thing, no matter what you believe, to connect your creativity and connect your purpose to something bigger than yourself and connecting it to something that's bigger than what is good for only you and yours. And that's, you know, my faith is instilled in me from an early age and staying close with God and staying close with him through my work is something that's always been a priority.

SID EVANS: Were there particular songs or hymns that really resonated with you or made a big impact?

JON BATISTE: Oh, absolutely. "Just a closer walk with thee." In fact, I'm thinking about back when I was in school, we used to sing, "We have come this far by faith." And, you know...

JON BATISTE: [sings] We have come this far by faith.... du na na na na...leaning on the Lord... [sings] Trusting in his holy word. Mmm. He's never failed me yet...do do ding....ohh, can't turn around. We've come this far by faith.

JON BATISTE: That one was—that one has stuck with me forever.

SID EVANS: Hmm. What a beautiful thing and it seems like something you sing with a group, you know?

JON BATISTE: Absolutely. The part...

JON BATISTE: [sings] Oh. Oh, can't turn around...

JON BATISTE: That proclamation of your faith sung in a group is one of the most faith affirming things you can do.

SID EVANS: Oh, I love that. You know, Jon, talking about your musical upbringing, there's a scene in the movie *Soul* where the main character, Joe, has to sit down and audition for a woman who's kind of a jazz legend, right?

JON BATISTE: Oh, yeah. Yes. Dorothea Williams. [laughs]

SID EVANS: So I'm wondering if you ever had a similar moment in your career when you were coming up?

JON BATISTE: Well, I had a few of these powerful matriarchal figures remind you of a grandmother or a stern mother. And you sit at the piano—for me, that was Abbey Lincoln. I sat at the piano at her place and she was auditioning me. I was 16, 17 -- the first year, moved to New York out of high school. I graduated high school early. And I go to New York City and I'm looking for a gig. Friend of mine recommends me to Abbey Lincoln. And at this point, this is probably the last band that she had, um, before she passed. And, and I go to her house and she's there at the door. She points me to the piano. No words beyond hello. I sit at the piano and then, you know, she starts singing, she's a legendary jazz singer whose voice, you know, especially for jazz fans and movie fans from that era when she was married to Max Roach. You know, you hear her voice and it's like you're hearing a record in person. And, and it just kind of shook me. And I started to play. And, by the end of the song, she, she's like she's a different person. She's like, "you got the gig." But she doesn't really say, you got the gig. She just starts talking about other things. And that's how, you know, OK, now I'm in. And I felt it. I was initiated, you know?

SID EVANS: Well, that sounds kind of intimidating.

JON BATISTE: Yeah, it's intimidating, but I realize looking back, you know, these are people who are so strong and have had to protect their art and their vision, you know, from so many things. Especially, you talk about women of that time and coming up in a male dominated field and, really trying to figure out how to protect the vision of her creativity and, keep the standards high. You know, and I really respect that.

SID EVANS: You know, speaking of strong women, I want to ask you about someone you've performed with a few times, Mavis Staples.

JON BATISTE: Oh, yes.

SID EVANS: You know, she was such a force as a musician and an activist and a voice for the Black community and still is. What does she mean to you as an artist?

JON BATISTE: She was one of those people that when I met her, I felt blessed just to be able to connect on a person to person level with somebody who I view almost as a saint. A living saint in the sense that she's shone a light for so many of us, pointed us toward the right direction, put her life on the line, and, to just know her and have her not only be somebody who's inspired me, but to call a friend and a collaborator it means the world to me. That's, that's what life is about, those kind of relationships and passing on that kind of wisdom.

SID EVANS: Is she someone that you're in touch with?

JON BATISTE: Oh, yes. In fact, a funny story is, when I was finishing my album, she was someone who I was talking to on the phone and this is during the first wave of the pandemic. And I'm talking to her on the phone. And, um, since then, she's got her vaccination. But she was just sitting at home like all of us before that. (laughs) Um, I, I started talking to her about what it means to be free. And she starts talking about freedom. And I get so moved by the words that she's saying, you could tell she's just caught in the spirit saying these words. And I ask her, can you...can you say that again? And let me record you? She says that again. And, and that's one of the clips that ended up on my album just from being in touch with on the phone and not really thinking about trying to capture anything for the album. Next thing you know, she's on the album.

SID EVANS: Oh, no kidding. That's great.

JON BATISTE: Yes, indeed.

(Instrumental music break)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: I'll have much more with the great Jon Batiste, after the break.

[BREAK]

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme)

Voice Over from SID EVANS:: Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam, from *Southern Living*. I'm Sid Evans, and we're talking with Jon Batiste.

SID EVANS: I want to ask you about somebody else that you've referenced in other conversations. You've said that you're frequently in touch with Stevie Wonder, who...

JON BATISTE: Stevie...whooh.

SID EVANS: ...who was very instrumental in getting Martin Luther King Day declared a national holiday. And with everything going on in this world right now and and last summer especially, I'm just wondering, what are some of your conversations about?

JON BATISTE: Well, he's mostly at a point in his life where he's seen it all. And our conversations are really more just him telling stories and me asking questions. And then, of course, just checking up on each other and family and friends, you know, just as friends do, how's the family. But I think what I find the most incredible—part of the relationship is that he's seen so much. And I'm going through the things that he went through now.

SID EVANS:, it's very important in your life, I think, to have, these elders, whether it's people in your family, who I have, and also people outside of your family, who can relate to what you're going through and can give you the wisdom to help you to deal with those situations as you face them.

SID EVANS: Well, I imagine he has got plenty of wisdom (laughs) to share.

JON BATISTE: Yes, it's a—the music business is really separate from music. So when you find someone who has been able to keep their joy intact and, to do it at such a high level of the music business, it's really interesting to me because, there's not been a lot of people who have gone into the music business at that level and come out on the other side unscathed.

JON BATISTE: And to have so much joy, you know? How do you keep the purity of your gift and your creativity and not lose any part of yourself, you know, or compromise anything about what you believe and what you want to create? So those are the kinda things that are important to really understand.

SID EVANS: Well, Jon, your new album, *We Are*, drops tomorrow. And the title song, which came out last summer is just magnificent, and there's this refrain in that song, hm, "We are. We are. We are. We are the golden ones. We are. We are. We are the chosen ones". Can you tell me about those lines and what that song meant when it came out?

JON BATISTE: I wanted to speak to the realization that I had that whether we like what's going on in the world of politics, in the world of the government in general, or media, or our community, the people who have the most power are the citizens. It's us and we are chosen to be on this earth in this situation at this time. And we have a choice to make as to whether we want to accept all that comes with that, or if we don't want to accept it. And we accept it, we didn't have to decide which way we want to go. Where do we want to take it all? Because at the end of the day, those things don't control us. We control those things. There's a lot that can be unpacked when we start to look at things from the perspective of our own personal power and the power of our communities versus looking for someone to come along to remedy things that we want to see changed.

SID EVANS: But, you know, you must have written that song before any of the protests of last summer or before George Floyd, is that right?

JON BATISTE: Oh, absolutely. Again, most of my music comes from the internal, not the external. So it comes from a spiritual place. And when it lines up with things that are happening in the world, I think that that speaks to the depth of spirituality in the music.

(Jon Batiste's song "We Are" plays. Lyrics: "We are the golden ones / we are the chosen ones / we are the chosen ones / we are the golden ones / We're never alone, no, no / We're never alone.")

SID EVANS: Well, it was just uncanny how much it seemed to connect with the times.

JON BATISTE: The deeper you go on the inside, hopefully, the more timeless and the more relevant the messaging will be. You talk about hymns, that's what makes hymns so powerful. You know, they can apply to you in any time in your life. Think about "Amazing Grace." Those songs weren't written for a specific moment, but the depth of them applies to all moments.

SID EVANS: So I want to ask you about your new song, "I Need You." We've all been through the most horrific year and I mean, we've lost so many people. We've all been in this really dark tunnel. And you've come out with a song that is just totally jubilant. Can you tell me where this song came from?

JON BATISTE: I was thinking about the 1930s and 1940s, the juke joint, chitlin circuit, where you would see somebody like Little Richard or Fats Domino and they'll be playing these baselines.

JON BATISTE: [sings] Bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom bom. That classic rhythm and blues, rock and roll bassline. And the jitterbug and the Lindy hop dance from

Harlem, in the Harlem Renaissance in the 1930s. And that whole aspect of the Black social experience of that time blended with the sounds of a pop song of today. And even in the music video, I really, really think that the music video is such a great capture of all of that. Where I'm dancing and my partner and I are dancing this Lindy hop choreography that's blended with, uh, contemporary popular styles of dance. And we have the whole chorus doing it. And, you know, it really is a blend of those two worlds. And I think we just always -- we need to feel that love, that joy in that community.

SID EVANS: It's just so fun, the whole thing is just so fun and it just makes you want to get up out of your chair.

JON BATISTE: Yes, I love that there's been so many people sending me videos of them doing just that, when they get up and dance...dancing in their kitchen or their living room. And, you know, we've been doing this thing on Sundays, even when we dance on Instagram, where you can go live and you can have people from all over the world. I can do a dance with you to the song. So, you know, people have been joined in from all over the world. We've just been dancing together for an hour.

(Jon Batiste's song "I Need You" plays. Lyrics: "We've done a lot of livin', we working overtime / Don't need another million. You got to that gold mine / I love the way you're living 'Cause you're so genuine / You got that something special. Didn't you know? / I just need you, you, you...")

SID EVANS: I mean, it's just hard to sit down and listen to that song.

JON BATISTE: It's a feel good song, baby.

SID EVANS: It's wonderful. Well, Jon, you've been through a really strange year like everybody. Um, you haven't been able to get in front of audiences, uh, as much as you normally would. Um, have you gotten a chance to do any cooking?

JON BATISTE: You know it! (laughs) All the time, actually. It's one of the ways that I've kept sane.

SID EVANS: What do you like to cook, what are you known for?

JON BATISTE: You know what? It's those red beans and rice that my mother taught me. My mama said, make it like this, and I'll tell you what, that's the right way to make it. In fact, I gave a recipe tutorial leaving out some of the secret, but...I made a recipe tutorial online. A lot of people got a thrill out of it...and making some gumbo, making some grits. I love grits and eggs and bacon. You know, everybody prepares their grits in different ways of shrimp and harmony, you know, um, made that the other other—actually, every other morning I'm making grits or some sort of, um, different version of of spice in the grits. I like sweet grits sometimes. I like cheesy grits sometimes. I like some tangy grits sometimes. I can go on and on just cooking different pastas. I might get into some Yakamein, if you know that is.

SID EVANS: No, nu-uh.

JON BATISTE: It's a soup that's a mix of, um, New Orleans and Asian flavors. It's got an egg base. It's very, very good. It's very popular in New Orleans.

SID EVANS: Wow, that sounds great. You make a good gumbo?

JON BATISTE: Oh, yeah, I mean, my strongest recipe is the red beans and rice. And the gumbo is probably like a close second. But the gumbo, I don't make the gumbo as much because it takes a little longer, you know?

SID EVANS: Yeah.

JON BATISTE: I like to soak my beans overnight, but gumbo will take me at least three days to do it right.

SID EVANS: [laughs]

JON BATISTE: Y'all know what I'm talking about.

SID EVANS: Sometimes it's worth it.

JON BATISTE: Oh, yeah. But it's a special occasion dish, so I don't have as much practice with it, you know?

(Instrumental music break)

SID EVANS: Well, Jon, listen, we started out talking about the movie *Soul*, which is about a very talented musician who's searching for something. And with everything you have going on right now, I'm just wondering, what are you searching for?

JON BATISTE: Every day, just trying to walk the path the way that the spirit leads me. You know, my faith is really the thing that helps me to stay grounded and take every day, one day at a time. And when you do that, everything falls into place the way it needs to. As long as you are connected to the source. And for me, that's God through my faith as a Christian, it's connected to that source. I think everybody, you know, when they're walking right and they're doing the right, the right thing in their life, they feel connected to that source. And, uh, and that's what I'm always seeking to do in terms of, uh, my daily walk, you know?

SID EVANS: Is that something that you share with Stephen at all, your, your connection to faith?

JON BATISTE: Oh, yes, that's, that's one of the things that connected us from the beginning. I don't think we knew that, but once we got to know each other more, it was evident that that was something that made our chemistry what it is. But it's a beautiful thing when you find people out there in the world that are also collaborators who have that same faith. It's not about going out to necessarily proselytize to people, but there is something powerful when you have two or more gathered like that. It's beautiful.

SID EVANS: And of course, you got that red beans and rice connection, too.

JON BATISTE: Hey, you know what? He loved coming down and having those beans. I tell you that. He still talks about it. And that was six, seven years ago. So you can imagine, it's that good.

SID EVANS: Well, Jon Batiste, thank you so much for being on Biscuits and Jam.

JON BATISTE: Hey, man. Thank you. I'm so glad to be here. This is great, great conversation and just great energy, man. (laughs)

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

Voice Over from SID EVANS: Thanks for listening to my conversation with Jon Batiste. You can find his new album *We Are* -- and his award-winning score to the animated film *Soul* -- wherever you get music. Plus, you can watch him weeknights on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert on CBS.

Southern Living is based in Birmingham, AL, and this podcast was produced and edited in Nashville, TN. 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.

Biscuits and Jam is produced by Heather Morgan Shott, Krissy Tiglias and me, Sid Evans, for *Southern Living*. Thanks also to Ann Kane, Danielle Roth, Erica Wong, Jim Hanke, Matt Sav and Rachael King at Pod People.

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