

Jon Batiste. *WE ARE*

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With the release of his sixth studio album, *WE ARE* (2021),¹ Jon Batiste transformed from late night bandleader to center-stage popular music celebrity.² The album helped secure five GRAMMY awards for Batiste and his team and garnered critical and commercial success. A multi-genre offering, *WE ARE* received nods in R&B, contemporary classical, and American roots awards categories. The album comes in at thirteen tracks with a 38-minute play time. There is also a nineteen-track deluxe edition that adds five remixes and the 12/8 soul jam “WORK IT OUT.”³ Conceptually, *WE ARE* is a multi-genre excavation of U.S. popular music that bridges the gap between the politics of the Civil Rights era and the summer of 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, which inspired the creation of the album’s title track.⁴

Batiste is a member of one of New Orleans’s most respected musical families.⁵ His father, Michael, is a member of the Batiste Brothers Band and played bass with Jackie Wilson and Isaac Hayes on the so-called “Chitlin’ Circuit.” Growing up, Batiste lived just outside of New Orleans in Kenner, but *WE ARE* leans strongly into the New Orleans aspects of Batiste’s upbringing.⁶ The ethical center of “TELL THE TRUTH” is built around Michael Batiste’s parting words before his son left for Juilliard: “I’m thinking ‘bout my papa/now that I’m a star ... before you drive off, boy/better know who you are/ He said tell it like it is.” The “Uptown” remix of the track from the deluxe album reimagines the song as a Black Masking Indian chant featuring Big Chief Romeo Bougere of the 9th Ward Hunters and the 79rs Gang on vocals and Michael Batiste on a stank-face-inducing electric bass.

“BOY HOOD,” “MOVEMENT 11,” and “ADULTHOOD” make up a mini suite in the middle of the album.⁷ The intentional space between “boy” and “hood” in “BOY HOOD”’s title evokes the state of being a boy and the neighborhoods of Batiste’s childhood as he sings about No Limit soldiers, bubblegum, church on Sundays, and the pre-2008 colors of a Popeye’s bag (red, white, and blue). Joining him on the track are alumni of two of his high school music programs: PJ Morton, who is a graduate of St. Augustine High School, and Troy “Trombone Shorty” Andrews, who was classmates with Batiste at the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts (NOCCA). “BOY HOOD” pays homage to New Orleans hip-hop with bounce-like high hats on a beat produced by Florida native Jahaan Sweet.

¹Batiste uses this stylized capitalization throughout marketing materials for the album and I follow suit in this review. Interestingly, the physical liner notes that come with the vinyl record omit capital letters altogether.

²For more on Batiste’s role as late-night TV acousmètre and the racial history of this trope, see Nicole Erin Morse, “Staying Human: Jon Batiste as Acousmètre on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 50, no. 1 (2022): 2–12.

³In addition to “WORK IT OUT,” the deluxe edition notably includes a Big Freedia remix of “FREEDOM” and a version of “ADULTHOOD” featuring BJ the Chicago Kid.

⁴The correspondence between these two periods can be seen in the album’s graphic design. The “WE ARE” typeface on the LP is a gender-inclusive take on the “I AM A MAN” signs used by activists in the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike.

⁵For a musical history of the Batiste family, see Paul A. Batiste, (*Gon’ Be Dat*) *New Orleans Music: Memoirs of Paul Batiste* (New Orleans: Artang Publishing Co., 2012).

⁶“I’m From Kenner” is the title of a track from the independently released *My N.Y.* (2011) that many will recognize from its use as transition music on *Late Night with Stephen Colbert*.

⁷When I spoke to Hot 8 Brass Band trumpeter Christopher Cotton about recording “ADULTHOOD,” he described these three songs as conceptually linked. Batiste also explicitly calls the three songs a suite in an interview with Relix Media: Dean Budnick, “Track By Track: Jon Batiste ‘We Are,’” Relix Media, November 24, 2021, <https://relix.com/articles/detail/track-by-track-jon-batiste-we-are/>.

“MOVEMENT 11” is a 2-minute-long piano and violin instrumental meant to evoke the experience of growing up, which received a GRAMMY nod for best contemporary classical composition. Lastly, “ADULTHOOD” is an R&B bop that delves into relationships and grown folks’ stuff over a laid-back groove with crisp rim shots and an electric bass track by Batiste. In the final moments of the song, the Hot 8 Brass Band cut loose to play the track out.

Batiste’s smooth falsetto is comparable to that of the late New Orleans pianist James Booker, whom Batiste cites as part of his musical lineage alongside Louis Armstrong and Nat King Cole in the lyrics of “BOY HOOD.”⁸ This falsetto is the highlight of the track “CRY,” which mourns “the loss of the innocence,” “the struggle of the immigrants,” and “wrongful imprisonment.” Batiste gives the audience a moment to sit with their feelings, suggesting, like affect theorist Ann Cvetkovich outlines, that sadness and depression can be a resource for political action.⁹ The penultimate track, “SING,” serves as a joyful antidote to “CRY”’s inertia: “On the verge of cryin’/I don’t feel like tryin’/But instead I’ll sing.” Beginning only with a sparse, Fender Rhodes-like synthesizer, Batiste’s vocals, and hand percussion, the song works its way into a vocable-driven force that’s difficult not to sing along with.

Reflecting on *WE ARE* winning the Album of the Year, Batiste later said, “So much went into that moment, piano lessons, Civil Rights marches....”¹⁰ The significance of *WE ARE*’s success includes Batiste becoming the first Black artist to win Album of the Year since Herbie Hancock in 2008. In recent years, voter snubs of Black artists like Kendrick Lamar and Beyoncé for less critically acclaimed white artists inspired the #GrammysSoWhite hashtag. Indeed, the whiteness of the Recording Academy’s membership has long shaped the aesthetic preferences of the GRAMMYS, leading to a critical mass of choices that uphold white supremacy. Many of the white artists themselves even disagreed with their wins. In 2014 Macklemore’s *The Heist* won Best Rap Album over Kendrick Lamar’s *good kid m.A.A.d. city*, leading Macklemore to awkwardly issue a public apology to Lamar. Moreover in 2017, Adele tearfully admitted in her acceptance speech for Album of the Year that Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* was the album deserving of the award. As musicologist and sound engineer Jasmine Henry notes, the Recording Academy has long upheld white elite socioeconomic interests, often relying on rhetorics of abstract liberalism to do so.¹¹ *WE ARE* centers genres of Black music that are legible to the Recording Academy, making it also a logical pick by an institution struggling to uproot its own whiteness.

However, this isn’t the only context for *WE ARE*. Batiste’s win reverberated through New Orleans, making GRAMMY winners of many musicians. Among them were the Hot 8 Brass Band, for whom the win felt particularly meaningful. The band laid down tracks for “ADULTHOOD” at Esplanade Studios in 2019. By the time the album dropped in March 2021, the musicians’ lives had been upended by the pandemic, which silenced live music and endangered many artists’ livelihoods. Then in August, Hurricane Ida knocked out power to large areas of the city for almost 2 weeks. While the city was still shrouded in darkness, the Hot 8’s beloved bandleader, Bennie Pete, passed away from complications related to sarcoidosis and COVID-19. The GRAMMY win fulfilled one of Bennie’s professional goals, making it deeply significant to band members. Hot 8 trumpet player Christopher Cotton relayed that, “We was all excited, mainly, for Bennie to get the GRAMMY.”¹² That excitement was amplified by sharing the win with Batiste and so many others in the city who contributed to the album—from the professional musicians filling the liner notes to the children in the St. Augustine High School Marching 100.¹³ The music of New Orleans is often unrightfully held at arm’s length from mainstream

⁸In the lyrics, Batiste uses Booker’s oft-used sobriquet, “Bayou Maharajah.” For an excellent documentary on Booker’s life featuring interviews with his friends and colleagues, see Lily Keber, dir., *Bayou Maharajah: The Tragic Genius of James Booker* (Cadiz Music, 2013), <http://www.bayoumaharajah.com/>.

⁹Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

¹⁰5× GRAMMY Winner Jon Batiste Comes Home To The Late Show, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvozY07eow0>.

¹¹Jasmine Henry, “#GrammysNotAsWhite: Critical Race Theory and the Grammys’ Race Problem,” *The Popular Culture Studies Journal* 8, no. 2 (2020): 121–40.

¹²Christopher Cotton, telephone interview with author, December 4, 2022.

¹³For more on the city’s Black, all-boy Catholic school, St. Aug, and the Marching 100, see *Bended Knees: The Story of the Marching 100*, Documentary (Cierra Films, 2000), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrb2vBCNW78>.

popular music success, but with *WE ARE*, Batiste brought his family and city along to enjoy their moment center stage.

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