

# Reviews

## ★ DOWNTOWN JAZZ FESTIVAL

# Explosive end to 10-day blast

**Ticketed concerts sold out as series bounces back**

**Dr. John, Del Junco leave 'em dancing in aisles**

BY GREG QUILL  
ENTERTAINMENT COLUMNIST

"Keep The Music Simple" was the message New Orleans jazz/R&B/rock legend Dr. John — aka Mac Rebennack — brought to the final concert last night of the 19th Toronto Downtown Jazz Festival.

It was his opening number, a great, fat, swaggering disco groove built — as are most of Rebennack's songs — around a simple vocal lick and an irresistible bottom-heavy backbeat.

Funky and loose, the piece set the tone for the remainder of his 90-minute show, and symbolized the most memorable thematic characteristics of the 10-day event: Diversity, artistic generosity and inclusiveness.

"We're back on track," festival president Pat Taylor told the *Star*, referring to recent years in which the programming suffered for lack of corporate funding after tobacco money was disallowed by government edict.

"Every (ticketed) concert was a sell-out. We have secure funding through at least 2007. We had the best weather in our history, and we're looking forward to something special for our 20th anniversary next year."

Though the festival's core remains solidly mainstream jazz — Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Rollins, Diana Krall, Roy Hargrove and Joshua Redman were among this year's luminaries — the Toronto Downtown Jazz Festival, like festivals spotlighting other musical genres, is venturing more into blues, rock,



HARRISON SMITH/TORONTO STAR

Last mainstage performance of the Toronto Downtown Jazz festival featured an opening act by harmonica player Carlos del Junco, left, that was so well received it took pianist and vocalist Dr. John a while to win them over to his funky and loose New Orleans style.

world music and folk for celebrity name draws that also fit within its expanding definition.

Typical of this shift was the pairing Dr. John and his excellent band — drummer Herman Ernest III, bassist David Barard and guitarist John Fohl — with Toronto harmonica dog Carlos Del Junco and an astonishingly versatile trio of bassist Henry Heilig, drummer Jordan John and guitarist Shawn Kellerman.

While Rebennack's public relations bumf lumps him in with New Orleans jazz pioneer Louis Armstrong, the gifted pianist owes more to bayou mythology, swamp boogie and R&B than to traditional jazz and

pure improvisation.

Dr. John's powerful grooves, acidic chuckle and voodoo mystique — he performed last night with what appeared to me a monkey's skull on his piano — are the stuff of pure pop invention, and when they're extended beyond their natural reach, as they were towards the end of last night's set, the music moves even farther away from jazz and into psychedelic impressionism.

That was a perfect fit with Cuban-born Del Junco's barnstorming, genre-defying performance, which brought the packed house to its feet and seemed destined for an encore when the house lights were raised.

An absolutely breathtaking — literally, given the immense capacity of his lungs — master of perhaps the most primitive instrument in the musical cupboard, the straight harp, De Junco and his very muscular band ripped through boundaries that usually separate jazz, hard rock, blues, ska, and folk, uttering sounds for which the harmonica was never intended, and vesting the simple reed instrument with a dignity it hasn't possessed since Dutch jazz harpist Toots Thielemans brought it to serious music concert halls in the 1960s.

No wonder Rebennack seemed a little ticked off that after an hour of laying down some of the most formidable dance music in the R&B canon, the crowd was still sitting. They were clearly relaxing in the grooves after Del Junco's stunning assault.

"I came all the way from New Orleans, and y'all are still on your ass. Why ain't you dancin' yet?"

They didn't need to be asked a second time.

See video excerpts from Carlos' Performance - [click here](#)