

A Spiritual Uncle and Nephew

Guitar slinger Darren Hoffman and master drummer Shannon Powell are Uncle Nef.

BY BRETT MILANO

UnCLE Nef may not be the only blues-rock band who can play original tunes, a Nirvana cover and "St. James Infirmary" in the same set. But they're likely the only duo consisting of a youngish guitar slinger who swears by New Orleans music history, and a master drummer who's made a lot of that history.

The band is also the product of a solid if somewhat unlikely friendship. Darren Hoffman, a Miami native, first studied to be a movie director and did some work in filmmaking before relocating to New Orleans and committing to music. He studied drumming at the University of New Orleans, where Shannon

Powell became his teacher and mentor. The latter's history goes back to the '70s when he joined Danny Barker's band as a teenager. Powell then played drums with a handful of legends, including Earl King, Dr. John, Harry Connick Jr. and a bunch of the Marsalises. He is also a regular at Preservation Hall. In addition to studying with Powell, Hoffman started frequenting Powell's gigs and was eager to soak up everything he could.

"I was 22 when I decided to move to New Orleans. I started studying this music beforehand, and when I got here, I started crash-coursing it and made that my job," Hoffman said. "We wound up finding this



common ground, in a cross-generational context."

"I adopted him," Powell said—hence their billing in the band as a spiritual uncle and nephew. "It can be lonely in New Orleans, so here was a kid who didn't know nobody, but had all these great ideas. He's a serious young man, one who does a lot of studying, and I came to appreciate him appreciating me." Adds Hoffman, "He started teaching me who to know in New Orleans. He's the king of Tremé, and Donna's [the former live music club on North Rampart Street] became my second home—Sunday night was his court. My take is that if I'm going to play with the greatest drummer in the world, I better do all the homework I need, and then some more."

Forming a band came surprisingly easily, though they clearly didn't need another drummer; so, Hoffman moved back to his original guitar. And it meant bringing all their influences into play—including Hoffman's being a fan of Jack White and his stripped-down approach to rocked-up blues. This proved to be one of the few styles that Powell hadn't already played. "It was all new to me," he said. "It was a different kind of blues style than I'd played with the great David Lastie and Earl King. It opens me up and gives me a chance to really hit the drums—playing jazz, I play a lot softer and more moderately. Now I'm getting people saying, 'We never knew you could play that style.' That's one good thing about doing this. I get to showcase my diversity."

There was no bass player when Hoffman and Powell first jammed together, so they decided to keep it that way. (When they add a third player it's usually an organist; David Torkanowsky will do the honors at Jazz Fest). "I didn't like it at first without bass," Powell admitted. "But when we started together, I saw how much space can be created when you take the bass out, so I was fascinated by that. Darren never even told me he was a good guitar player, and I found out." Adds Hoffman, "It creates a situation where the kick drum becomes the bass player. We all know that can

be a really compelling thing, and who has a better kick drum than Shannon Powell? When we first played together, we did a blues for 33 minutes. And you can see it in his eyes when Shannon gets lit up—he was saying, 'Man, we gotta record!'"

The two-piece lineup also invites White Stripes comparisons, though Hoffman cautions against taking that too far. "When I first heard the White Stripes, I was thinking, 'Ah, you beat me to it.' Because I'd always wanted to do a guitar-drums duo, which is a bit of a tradition in itself. But man, they got me." Still, Uncle Nef allows for a different spin. "It's almost in the context of putting that overdriven guitar with the shuffle of a Louis Jordan record. It's like Jack White was always saying, 'Here I am playing the blues, and I'm tricking you into thinking it's something else.' I think Nirvana was playing the blues as well." Hence the inclusion of Nirvana's "Tourette's" among the more traditional blues

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tracks on Uncle Nef's album *Love Songs*.

"Darren has turned me onto things I didn't know about, Nirvana and those kinds of things," Powell said. "As a musician in New Orleans I've always been surrounded by jazz, blues and gospel. So, I never grasped onto [much rock 'n' roll] because I was so fascinated by trying to play New Orleans traditional music." And he's hoping that younger crowds who get into Uncle Nef will go back to the traditional sources. "A lot of our music is about trying to educate the younger audience about the different styles of music, the old and the new, and who certain people were."

The eclectic approach should continue on their next album, which will include a couple of remixes alongside Prince's "Empty Room"—an obscure rarity that's one of Hoffman's favorites—and a tune that celebrates their connection, with the unlikely title "Black and Jew." As Hoffman says, "We have a few things in the classic Uncle Nef style. But we're opening it to a more expansive, dare I say ethereal vibe." ★