

THE BLUES AND THE ABSTRACT TRUTH

When he bubbled to the surface as a name to watch at the tail end of the 1990s, pianist Jason Moran was still a fairly unknown quantity. His progress since has been via a string of astutely confident highly complex albums that have dazzled and defied expectation. This month *Same Mother* comes out on Blue Note, an album he sees as his most 'obvious' record to date. He intends it to give his own take on the blues – a tall, tall order even for him. Interview: John Murph

'Backyard Bohemia' is the best way to describe Jason Moran. In his music, the pianist/composer reaches to the outer edges of the universe, often grabbing hold of the most far-flung of artistic stars, whether it's European classical music, film scores, hip hop or modern furniture. But somehow, he manages to bolster all the seemingly disparate elements with a gutbucket sensibility.

Born in Houston, Texas but now living in the Big Apple, Moran never shied away from his rustic upbringing: something that many native southerners feel is necessary, to thrive in the urbane northern U. S. cities. But he's not all Dirty South, fronting an affected countrified vibe like many of today's top hip hop stars. He's comfortably modernistic.

Relaxing in the elegant work room of his Harlem condo, which he shares with his opera singing-wife, Alicia Hall Moran, you get a sense of his vast knowledge and sly humour. There's the stylish Bauhaus print hovering above his desk; a black Bible artfully etched into the shape of a pistol, resting on the upright piano; and a small music and DVD library that ranges from Maria Callas to Richard Pryor.

In conversation, Moran can quickly touch upon the most erudite of subjects but makes it all digestible with his southern charm. He has an infectious laugh that he releases, when he knows that he's said something ironic. First comes an aloof giggle, then a knee-slapping guffaw.

Since emerging on the jazz scene, almost 10 years ago, first as the wily pianist for alto saxophonist Greg Osby, then later as an audacious solo artist, Moran has been *the* jazz artist to watch in terms of steering the music into the 21st century. With each solo disc, starting with the prophetic *Soundtrack to Human Motion* from 1999, he proved to be not only a wicked improviser, prone to dense harmonies, jangly rhythms and oblique melodies, but also an intrepid composer and interpreter – uncorking renditions of music by Duke Ellington, Björk, Maurice Ravel, Afrika Bambaataa and Johannes Brahms with equal panache.

This month after five critically acclaimed discs, Moran releases *Same Mother*, a blues-based disc in which he considers his most 'obvious' record to date.

'On my previous records, some of my motives were to shade the truth or going around it to the left or showing another deceptive way of doing it. Everything was about skirting the obvious,' he says.

'My thing now is to be a precise musician. Jazz is still an abstract art form. And we get away with being abstract too much. I've taken that to my advantage. I now want to see if I can be precise in my message.'

Those of you who might be getting a bit nervous, thinking that he's trading in his ballsy improvisational flair for mainstream success, don't fret. Although the disc shows Moran delving deep into the blues aesthetic, it features the same elastic, hyper-kinetic interplay he concocts with his longtime band mates drummer Nasheet Waits and bassist Tarus Mateen. This time, though, guitarist Marvin Sewell joins the fray.



'I really wanted to do my first examination of what the blues is for black people in America, and how that music gave black people freedom of expression'

– Jason Moran

As for the music being 'obvious?' Well, keep in mind that this *is* Jason Moran, a trickster of a musician with a subversive sense of humour. 'It's a re-examination of the blues,' he clarifies.

'I wanted the album to reflect how I grew up in the south and the people and family that I knew. The music should sound like it's just sitting in the sun; ain't no shade. You're in the sun and it's beaming on you. And you know that it's hot.'

Same Mother certainly burns with combusive energy, blasting off with the jittery original 'Gangsterism on the Rise' on which Moran hammers out a five-note riff that at first sounds as if it was lifted from a Bo Diddley tune, before tickling out a double-fisted zig zagging melody, made all the more menacing thanks to the rambunctious accompaniment from Waits and Mateen. That's followed up with the sweltering, honky-tonk 'Jump Up', the lovely 'Aubade', a sanguine duet between Moran and Sewell, and a vehement take on Albert King's 'I'll Play the Blues for You.'

Even during its calmer pieces, *Same Mother* emits humidity. Such is the case with the evocative, 'Restin' on which Moran pecks out a sparse lyrical melody on top of Sewell's elongated guitar yawns and Mateen's burbling bass. The song conveys a steamy

afternoon in which the sun is blazing over melting asphalt just after a mid-July rain shower. 'I wanted to do a piece that actually sat and didn't feel like it had to move anywhere,' Moran says.

'That quality is prevalent in a lot of the great blues recordings. There's this feeling like these cats really didn't have too much to do; so there was no rush in their music. Living in New York, you're constantly rushing. I come from Houston: a very slow place. Still it's always difficult to play slowly and everyone has their own perception of what slow is. How Tarus played his notes and how Marvin used his effects on guitar and what I was playing; it was almost like I was falling asleep.'

Like Moran's previous works, *Same Mother* has its eyebrow-raising selections too. The most emotionally poignant moment comes with his makeover of Sergei Prokofiev's 'The Field of the Dead', written in 1938 for a film about Russian war hero, Alexander Nevsky. 'People fighting and dying is very blues oriented,' Moran says with a sheepish grin. Here, he underscores Waits' suspenseful tom-tom fills and cymbal crashes and Mateen's simmering bass counterpoints with his most elegiac playing on the disc. The song's sense of anguish is made all the more vivid by Sewell's ghostly slide-guitar.

Then there's that often-touted debt to Africa. Whereas on 2003's *The Bandwagon*, where Moran crafted melodies and rhythms based upon taped telephone conversations in Chinese and Turkish, on *Same Mother* he underscores the abstract blues of 'Jump Up' and 'G Suit Saltation' with ebullient rhythms, based upon Rwandan Hutu drumming. In concert, Moran claims that sometimes he'll play recordings on the African drumming on the loudspeakers and perform along with it.

'We'll play "Lovers" as our way of saying that we should love Africa just as much as we love Europe and Asia.'

The seeds for *Same Mother* were planted two years ago when Moran was scoring music for Seith Mann's award-winning independent short film, *Five Deep Breaths*. The filmmaker told Moran that he wanted men singing in the music, which piqued the pianist's imagination of mournful hymns. 'I could only hear one thing,' Moran recalls as he belts a sorrowful moan. 'But I didn't have any recordings that sounded like that; I knew that they existed, though.'

So to capture that moan he heard in his head, Moran explored Alan Lomax's storied library of field-recordings. 'I found this particular recording and listened to it in-depth in the mountains of Alberta, Canada – far removed from anything being remotely Negro,' he says with robust laugh.

'They weren't trained singers,' Moran says of the Lomax field recordings. 'But they would have these orchestrations that were better than the Westminster Choir. It's like damn! I was in awe of how they were able to put music together like that and not really care about the rules of the music. Most successful blues artists were able to do that, as if they didn't let the music dictate what they were suppose to do.'