



Photo courtesy of Joe Krown.

# Tribute: Joe Krown Pays Tribute To His New Orleans Piano Heroes

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0 COMMENTS

Joe Krown's multidimensional career includes his work as a soloist and group leader, 13 years in the late Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown's band and ongoing membership in the Kenny Wayne Shepherd Band. A New Orleans pianist and organist, Krown performs as many as one hundred shows a year with the guitar star from Shreveport.



*Joe Krown with Gatemouth Brown's final Jazz Fest performance on April 28, 2005.*

*Photo courtesy of Joe Krown.*

"He's dazzling, one of the guitar heroes," Krown said of the five-time Grammy-nominated Shepherd. "It's not so much about him playing a million notes. He captures it all, playing with a lot of feeling. What sets him apart from his generation of guitar heroes, like Joe Bonamassa, is that he can write a hit song."

In Shepherd's band since 2017, Krown performs alongside Chris Layton, drummer in the late Stevie Ray Vaughan's band, Double Trouble. "Chris defined the Texas shuffle," Krown said of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee. "He's a rock star on his own."

Joining Layton and Krown in the Shepherd band rhythm section, bassist Kevin McCormick has impressive stage and studio credits, too. He produced recordings by Jackson Browne and Melissa Etheridge, and performed and recorded with Crosby, Stills & Nash; John Mayall; Nils Lofgren; Keb' Mo' and many more.

The Kenny Wayne Shepherd Band's headlining shows draw audiences in the 1,000 to 2,000 range, to venues such as ACL Live at the Moody Theater Austin, the Beacon Theatre in New York City and Ryman Auditorium in Nashville. And if the group is on a double bill with, for instance, Bonamassa or Buddy Guy, the audience grows from 3,000 to 5,000.

Krown usually performs at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and WWOZ's annual **Piano Night**, but he missed both events in 2023 because of Shepherd's European touring. The tour didn't stop the release of Krown's seventh solo album, *Tribute*. Paying homage to his New Orleans piano heroes, the album features Krown's renditions of songs identified with **Professor Longhair**, **Allen Toussaint**, **Dr. John** and **James Booker**. Three of Krown's New Orleans-style originals complete the *Tribute* track list.

Krown recruited an all-star lineup of guests for *Tribute*—**Leo Nocentelli**, **Ivan Neville**, Jason Ricci, Noah Hunt from the Kenny Wayne Shepherd Band, Joe Sublett from the Phantom Blues Band and the late **Walter "Wolfman" Washington**.



Joe Krown with Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Noah Hunt and Kevin McCormick. Fabrik in Hamburg, Germany. Photo courtesy of Joe Krown.

*Tribute* features Washington's final studio work. Suffering from tonsil cancer, Washington entered the studio in July 2022 during an apparent upswing in his health. A member of the Joe Krown Trio for fifteen years, Washington had been playing, but not singing, at the group's regular Maple Leaf Bar gigs during the latter months of his illness.

"But then Walter started singing one night," **Krown** recalled. "He seemed to have a surge into

the positive side. I asked him if he wanted to go to the studio. I did all the basics, and then I pulled him to the studio the next week. His playing was, of course, not an issue, but it took a half-dozen takes to get his voice clear. We did it line by line, and then took the best of it. By the fifth and sixth takes, a lot of good stuff was going down. Soon after that, he wasn't able to make any gigs."



Joe Krown at WWOZ Piano Night 2018.  
Photo by Michael E. McAndrew, courtesy of WWOZ.

Washington made his last studio appearance a gift to Krown. "I paid all the players up front," Krown said. "When I came to Walter, he said: 'Oh, no, man. I'm doing it for love.' A lot of things went on in Walter's career, but he prioritized doing this little thing we did together. That was special to me."

Krown guaranteed the participation of Washington and his other guests in *Tribute* by producing and financing the album himself. He subsequently licensed it to Sledgehammer Blues Records.

"I made it the way I wanted to make it, with the people I wanted to make it with," he said. "I didn't want a record label saying I'm going over budget, or they're not going to pay for this guy or that guy. To do it right, I needed certain people."

Like his earlier albums, *Tribute* documents Krown's musical priorities.



Joe Krown Trio with Walter "Wolfman" Washington and Russell Batiste.



“If you come hear me play, on any given night, these are the songs that I play,” he said. “This is my identity. I play boogie-woogie. I play Allen Toussaint songs and Professor Longhair music. This is who I am.”

Although Professor Longhair died a dozen years before Krown moved to New Orleans, the Long Island native knew and toured with two of his other keyboard inspirations, Dr. John and Allen Toussaint.

“When I was around them, I asked them to unlock their secrets, lay some heavy stuff on me,” he remembered. “They all said the same thing: ‘All I wanted to do was play boogie-woogie and play like Professor Longhair.’ That showed me how important boogie-woogie piano is and how important Professor Longhair is. Even someone who departed from Professor Longhair, like James Booker, was always playing boogie-woogie piano. It’s where it all comes from.”

Krown’s desire to keep the New Orleans piano tradition alive is another reason he recorded *Tribute*. His citywide perspective as the volunteer producer of WWOZ’s annual *Piano Night* was a prime inspiration for the album. The radio station’s director of content, Dave Ankers, credits Krown with keeping *Piano Night* alive when its future was on the chopping block.



Joe Krown at Maple Leaf Booker Piano Sessions. Photo courtesy of Joe Krown.

“Being the producer of *Piano Night*, I see that not a large generation of piano players coming up are doing New Orleans piano stuff,” he said. “The original guys like Eddie Bo and Allen [Toussaint] and Mac [Rebenneck], they’re all gone. There’s no new wave of people coming up behind them, because the younger guys are going more toward modern jazz. So, I thought it was important to do this record, making a statement that may inspire people to continue this. That’s where it’s at for me.”

A native of Westbury, Long Island, New York, Krown first encountered New Orleans piano in Boston during his early twenties. When Dr. John released a rather expensive instruction book-and-cassette package about New Orleans piano, Krown and some other struggling Boston pianists pooled their money to buy it. A drummer in one of his early bands also introduced him to the Professor Longhair-**Earl King** classic, “Big Chief.”

“From then on it was all New Orleans piano and boogie-woogie for me,” Krown said.

In 1992, Krown moved from Boston to New Orleans because he'd joined the Slidell-based Gatemouth Brown's band.

"I was looking at Nashville or New Orleans," **Krown** said. "I went to Nashville and stayed there with Gate's road manager for three weeks. I hated it. In Nashville, I felt like I was on another planet. I didn't know any of the Nashville artists or their music. It's not my thing. Then I came down to New Orleans. I walked down Bourbon Street and was like, 'I can play in every one of these bands because I know every song.' This is it. I'm home."

### Such a Night



### Tribute to Fess



• ALLEN TOUSSAINT

• CLARENCE "GATEMOUTH" BROWN

• DR. JOHN

• JOE KROWN

• KENNY WAYNE SHEPHERD

• PIANO NIGHT

• PROFESSOR LONGHAIR