JOE ALTERMAN & MOCEAN WORKER
Keep The Line Open

“We’re gonna make a record for Les McCann and for that entire era!”

The question is this: can you sonically recreate the vibe that made Les McCann a beloved figure in his 1960s and ‘70s heyday for a contemporary era that seems to desperately need that groove more than ever?

Mocean Worker and Joe Alterman have answered that question emphatically on their new album, *Keep the Line Open*! But before we get into the album itself, we must define that groove – that Les McCann vibe that, for those who know, is one of the most irresistibly soulful forces in jazz.

“There is no end to the possibilities (and fun) in music. So, why don’t we get on in there and get it?” Those are the words of Leslie McCann, born in 1935 in Lexington, Kentucky, and those words are a window into the music that he made throughout his life. Largely self-taught as a pianist, Les took inspiration from his time singing in church choirs with his family while also playing brass and drums in school bands. He continued his musical activities while serving in the navy, and Les so distinguished himself as a singer that he was granted a spot on The Ed Sullivan Show, the premier television showcase in the 1950s.

After leaving military service, McCann made his way to California. There he led a trio that backed a young singer named Gene McDaniels, who would become an integral part of the Les McCann story by the end of the 1960s. Les signed with Pacific Jazz Records, one of the numerous jazz record labels that popped up in the 1950s and 1960s to capitalize on the popular jazz that was en vogue at the time, and in 1960 his debut album, Les McCann Ltd. Plays the Truth, was released.

Right from the beginning, some stylistic patterns emerged that would become hallmarks within the McCann canon: a tasteful approach to the standard jazz repertoire and show tunes that he used to emphasize the trio as a democratic group made up of three equal parts; a wide open piano sound that showed a love of block chords and big, sustained tones; gospel music roots that would never leave him; and a soulfulness and blues sensibility that could not be contained! Like many jazz musicians of the era, Les released multiple albums within a year, all of which covered a wide range of styles and moods and could be described by adjectives that are sometimes absent within the jazz world – they were, above all else, easy to digest and listenable.

There are a couple of things that made Les McCann stand out as a jazz pianist and performer. One of them was his ability to sing. The concept of jazz trios, as we think of them, is always centered around the virtuoso pianist – think Erroll Garner, Oscar Peterson, Bill Evans, or even Ramsey Lewis, one of Les McCann’s contemporaries in the popular jazz world. Besides Nat Cole, we generally don’t associate the piano leader with their singing skills (Earl Grant was another, but he was known much more for his organ playing than piano, and much of what he recorded landed on the “pop” side of the music categories). Les, however, became known as much for his singing as for his piano playing, recording as a vocalist with Gerald Wilson’s big band as well as with other ensemble configurations. It is not a stretch to say that because of the success of Eugene McDaniels ’protest classic “Compared To What,” which was the groundbreaking single off of the blockbuster 1969 recording Swiss Movement, most people nowadays are likely to remember Les as a singer.

Swiss Movement, the album Les recorded with tenor saxophonist Eddie Harris at the 1969 Montreux Jazz Festival, brings us to that other factor that makes Les McCann a special performer: his approach to recording in the live setting. Based on the numerous live albums that he released in the '60s, Les was a lot like Cannonball Adderley in the way that he approached those recordings – he seemed to be interested in bringing you into the room, putting you right there with the patrons of the club where the records were made. (Interestingly, Les turned down the opportunity to join Cannonball's group in order to form his own band.) Les was a jovial presence on the bandstand, with witty banter that enhanced the experience as well as moans and grunts that let you know that he was reaching down deep within his soul to come up with just the right vamp, riff, lick, or line that would set the perfect feel for the musical story he was telling.

In the late '60s through the '70s, Les was aided by his very skillful and trusted producer Joel Dorn, who allowed all the uniquely Les-ian musical attributes to remain front and center, as well as crafting albums that would sound good to the woman and man on the street. That Joel Dorn connection is also largely responsible for *Keep the Line Open*, because one-half of the duo responsible for this record is Mocean Worker a.k.a. Adam Dorn, son of Joel.

Bassist/producer Mocean Worker and pianist/composer Joe Alterman, two musicians with experiences with legends ranging from jazz greats Les McCann, Eddie Harris, and Ramsey Lewis to soul/pop/rock giants like Luther Vandross, Marcus Miller, and Brian Eno, have come together to craft an album that reflects their diverse pasts while simultaneously charting a new and funky path forward into the soulful now! The fact that both of them separately had very close working relationships with Les, as well as a personal love and affection for him as a friend and mentor, make them the perfect duo to put together a tribute to a man who was undoubtedly larger than life.

The charge issued by Alterman and Worker was to make a jazz record that uses 21st century technology to pay homage to an era when the groove reigned supreme and the vibe was decidedly danceable; a record that invites you to feel comfortable snapping on two and four, shaking your hips, and swaying back and forth as the groove compels you; and an album that has that "live" thing without actually being a live album. Says Mocean Worker, "We wanted to make a record that harkened back to an era, and use the technology of the current era that says, 'Here's a party, and you can come to the party and not feel like you are being preached at…'"

Joe Alterman, while reflecting on his time working with Ramsey Lewis, also emphasized that attitude of making music that is, above all else, inclusive: "Ramsey was hard on me – [he said,] 'This is an audience, the people who are spending their hard-earned money to come and see you. You owe it to them to entertain them; they're not here for a music class, they're here to have a good time.'"

That shared mentorship, with musicians who loved, above all else, to entertain the audience, is an important aspect of what makes *Keep the Line Open* special; says Alterman, "That's one of the things Adam and I definitely have in common – how we got into the music and live with the music – and that's a point of this project, for sure."

Through technology and their innate knowledge of all things Les, Alterman and Worker have injected the soul of Les McCann into this project by having his voice be a vital part of it – his laughter, and the raspy timbre of his voice that was always present in the music that he made,

are the bonds that hold the music together. There seemed to be a literal connection between the grittiness in his speaking voice and the grit that permeates the music, even when he's not singing. That grit and that groove worked in tandem.

I Love It I Love It I Love It allows that point to be made plain right from the start: McCann's humorous cackle and interjection of "I love it, I love it, I love it" makes way for a funky, uptempo pseudo-mambo groove that allows Alterman to lay down some bluesy, churchy chords. This rollicking vamp in G allows for some rhythmic grooves on the piano that play off the cross stick percussive feel, as well as some bass sonorities that never get too busy. Worker layers in some sustained sonorities and handclaps, and, after the tone has been set, the first of many Eddie Harris interjections that appear on this album. Harris 'sound was, in many ways, the perfect complement to McCann's output; that this is represented throughout the album is a stroke of brilliance.

Yay Yay Yay has a familiar '60s vibe more akin to Ramsey Lewis 'big hit "The In Crowd," which, on its face, is not a bad thing, but somewhat humorous because of the friendly rivalry between McCann and Lewis. The groove is a slow bossa in D minor, and here Alterman and Worker introduce electric piano along with the normal acoustic piano sound (which, by the way, is a piano sound sampled from another '60s piano trio star – Bill Evans), as well as timpani sounds – not at all what one expects, but it works quite well in the overall sonic signature of the tune. Once again, Eddie Harris is represented – this time with his patented half-sung, half-played shrieks, an unmistakable Harris sound! Oh yeah – let's not forget the audience sounds which, as much as anything else, bring to mind that "In Crowd" vibe.

The Pee Wee Story is a short McCann reminiscence of the legendary (and somewhat infamous) MC Pee Wee Marquette, who, according to Les (and many others), based the quality of his introductions at Birdland jazz club on how much he was tipped. According to Les, $50 got him a great introduction!

Burnin 'Coal is the sole McCann cover included on this album, and as such it is heavy on the backbeat! Alterman and Worker keep pretty close to the original 1969 McCann recording, but with a more relaxed groove that effectively gives it even more of a party feel than the original. Alterman rattles off some very slick McCann-styled licks, while Worker's bass lays down a relentless pocket.

Les Loves Bass finds McCann confiding in Worker that bass was always his favorite instrument (to which Worker agrees), while also describing the less-than-perfect piano on which he began his stellar career.

Gimme Some Skin begins with a sampled drum groove which is kinda samba/kinda funky, leading to the entrance of Wurlitzer-styled electric piano that owes as much homage to Eddie Harris (who played electric piano on many of his records) and Ramsey Lewis as it does to Les McCann (with Eddie's sax/voice shriek dispersed liberally throughout). Midway through this piece, Worker lays down some deceptively intricate bass work (with clavinet sonorities in the keyboard), leading to a breakdown that allows the electric piano/clavinet to shine minus percussion for a bit, leading to a coda that lets the bass and keyboards vamp while Les asks, "Where are you?"

A quick McCann exhortation on LSD leads to perhaps the trippiest tune on the album, Circus Going Backwards (which was, according to Alterman and Worker, McCann's description of the music of Charles Mingus). "Circus" features a return of the "Burnin 'Coal" piano material, but

with a decidedly different sense - slower and more atmospheric than “Coal,” with the addition of tambourine (a Mingus favorite) to the rhythmic texture. With more Eddie sounds and Les counting in the background, the effect is somewhat dizzying, much as a circus going backwards might be perceived by a person who has taken LSD!

Get This To The People finds Les in a pensive mood, and could be heard as an homage to Ahmad Jamal, another titan of the piano trio who came out of that same milieu as McCann, Lewis, and Evans (Jamal passed away in April 2023, eight months before McCann). Alterman’s piano approach and Worker’s acoustic bass lend Get This To The People a vibe that brings to mind Jamal’s music, while Les begins to opine on why he likes a certain piano player – could he be describing Ahmad Jamal??

Starting with rising chromatic piano notes played in octaves, Moses Gonzalez shifts into a relaxed samba-esque Latin feel that finds Alterman varying between minor 7th and major 7th chords in D. The chromatic note patterns continue from time to time, sometimes rising and sometimes falling, giving the sensation of floating. Alterman and Worker go back and forth on this piece between the minor/major chords and grooves inspired by McCann. A tropical feel permeates throughout.

Lemme Tell You Something lays down a slow funk groove, while a spoken word introduction from the past reminds us that, in addition to his musical activities, Les was also a photographer and a painter (“a man who does many things, and he does them all well”). Les calls out to “Joe” throughout, and his laughter is sprinkled throughout as well. This track relies heavily on sampled layers of sound, including Eddie Harris ’shrieks, all of which remain in the background while Alterman and Worker lay in the cut, never allowing the groove to be lost.

Wouldn’t It Be Loverly is a revelation – Joe Alterman’s stride piano is quite spectacular, so much so that it is the only thing that you hear on the well-known song from the musical “My Fair Lady.” But as it should be, Les Gets The Last Word, on which he dispenses such wisdom as, “Whatever you’re doin’, keep it up: keep going, keep learning, every day something new, add to what you’re doing – you’ll find where you wanna go. Your whole life will be laid out right in front of you.”

It is a measure of the success of this recording that one tends to forget that Worker and Alterman are not some old heads who have been rediscovered from the past, but are in fact two very contemporary musicians who happen to share a similar aesthetic sensibility. Specifically, Worker and Alterman share a love of a musical past represented by the music of Les McCann and Ahmad Jamal and Ramsey Lewis and Eddie Harris, all of whom were known by one or both of them, as well as tenor saxophone living legend Houston Person, with whom Alterman has a new recording (it is worth noting that Alterman is a German word that means “old man”).

Worker describes himself as a “76-year-old 53-year-old!” He goes on to state that, “Everyone in my life musically has been 20 years older than me – I’ve worked more with that generation than my own.” He and Alterman have positioned themselves as keepers of a vibrant musical tradition – one that values a good time each time that one listens. And that is a Lestrospective that we can we can all share!

* **Mike Smith**, author of *In with the In Crowd: Popular Jazz in 1960s Black America*

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The saddest thing about this record that you're holding in your hands is that Les McCann had to pass away for it to have happened. A beautiful man. A loving man. A mentor… a gentle soul. A friend. A cheerleader. A man that wouldn't be sad that this happened this way. He'd have the widest grin imaginable on his face at this album's existence. That's Les in a nutshell.

Joe Alterman and I met because of Les McCann. One of the rare actually positive things that has ever occurred for me on social media is stumbling upon Joe's account on Instagram and seeing the constant flow of wonderful stories that he'd post about all things Les McCann. I didn't think I'd ever meet and talk to Joe, let alone become friends with him and make this record. Joe's world wasn't mine. Sure, we are both musicians and share many friends in common; I just didn't think we'd ever meet and actually collaborate. It was just nice to admire him and his incredible playing from afar – and then…..

Les McCann sadly passed away.

I first learned about this from a post on social media by a well-known drummer. It hit me hard. I'll admit, I lost touch with Les in the last three to four years of his life. I didn't stay in touch like I should have. I'm an open book and I admit my faults. I should have checked in more. Les deserved that and then some. I really loved Les. He was in an assisted living facility, and the few times I spoke with him it was just too painful. I've known Les my whole life. Les has never NOT been in my life. Les was like an uncle to me. My first memories of Les were from when I was about 5 years old. You see, my father, Joel Dorn, produced a bunch of albums for/with Les at the Atlantic Records label in the late 1960s until the mid-1970s. Classics. Groundbreaking material. Hit records: creative, soulful, emotional, synth-driven, INCREDIBLE music that broke boundaries. My father had signed Les to the label, and over the course of their working relationship they formed a very tight, close personal bond. Brothers. These recordings, in a lot of ways, led to me becoming a musician. I'd sit and get lost in the many layers of the album Layers. I'd play bass along with all of the tunes on Swiss Movement. The work my father and Les did together has always been a part of what I do as an artist. Period. When I sit down at a keyboard of any kind, the first thought on my mind before I start playing anything is, "What would Les McCann play?" That's how imprinted in my psyche and soul Les McCann is.

So back to this album. How did it happen? Well… I found myself in Atlanta in February of 2024 for a gig. A film that I helped write the musical score for was appearing at a film festival there, and knowing that Joe lived in Atlanta I reached out and said, "Hey man, would you maybe want to meet up and hang? Tell some Les stories?" The response was quick and very positive, and so a date was set to hang. Meeting Joe felt like meeting an old family member. We hit it off immediately. He invited me to a gig he had at a performing arts center a few days later, and the folks I was working with and I went down there and watched. We were all blown away. After the show, in an exuberant, enthusiastic moment, I said to Joe, "Man, that was incredible! We have to find a way to do something together!" Not having any idea how or when this could possibly happen.

A lot of times in this business, when those kinds of interactions occur it leads to nothing. People say a lot of shit in this business and NOTHING happens. NOT this time. I left Atlanta about two days later, and when I got home and into my studio I started messing around with groove ideas and tracks. Things I thought my old man and Les might make. I'm primarily a bass player – not something a lot of people know. My artist moniker, Mocean Worker, has me making mostly beat-driven music with synths and all types of programmed sounds – not bass playing. It's a core part of my musicianship, and as a matter of fact, as an 18-year-old I started playing bass with Les. An incredible experience. What an absolute joy it was to play with him. So much fun.

Les always kept tabs on what I was up to after we played together, and as I started developing my artist thing he was so supportive and always there to say, “You’ve got your own thing going on… develop it. You’re an artist. You’ve got something to say!” You hear that very same enthusiasm he had for Joe in real words at the end of this recording. Joe is kicking ass. Joe is doing and has done the work to be the artist he is. That leads me back to the process of making this album.

I started sending Joe ideas. 32 Bars here; 64 bars there. Sketches over grooves and things, and he’d play on them and solo on them and send back ideas. That’s how this all happened. This is true back and forth and trust. The main thing in collaborating like this is trust. If it’s not there, you are, as the kids say, “Fucked.” As the ideas went back and forth, they grew. Tunes started to take shape based on arrangement changes and new melodies being carved out of solos Joe would play. It all really sped up after about three or four ideas went back and forth. I got a real sense of how Joe was reacting to the grooves and how they should surround his playing. I got to play a burn of bass and a little bit of keyboards. I also got to do my favorite thing, which is program drums to make them sound like they weren’t programmed. We dug in and it started to get real fun, REALLY quickly.

At a certain point, after also talking on the phone a bunch, the idea dawned on me that this kind of music existed at its best in nightclubs in the ‘60s and ‘70s. While that isn’t really the scene anymore, why not make it feel like it’s a live album in the vein of Les and Eddie Harris, Ramsey Lewis and Ahmad Jamal? If we couldn’t get to the club, then let’s bring the club to us. Is it a live album? Is it not? I think yes, it is. This is born out of an era and an energy that we can channel and create on our own. That’s the ethos of this album. During the finishing of the album, Joe and I sent this record out to some mentors of ours and friends of Les’. The best reaction I got, from an octogenarian uber-hipster, was, “This is the best fucking album I’ve heard in years. You made my year.” The worst reaction was, “You can’t recreate Les McCann, he was one in a million.” Herb… We didn’t recreate Les McCann… We just made a recording to show our love for him! F- You missed the entire point.

So… it’s up to you, the listener. Does this make you feel good? Does it bring you joy? If so… that was all Les McCann ever cared about. When you came to see Les, you were entertained and it was all about YOU… not him. When you were friends with Les the same thing occurred. When you left a Les McCann concert you felt something. That something was positivity and being uplifted. Not me, me, me ego bullshit.

The last time I hung out with Les was at his apartment in the Sherman Oaks neighborhood in Los Angeles. We recorded an interview for a podcast I was doing. We had an incredible afternoon together. As I was leaving he said to me, “You see this music gear. Take it, it’s yours. You’ll make magic with this. I’m done making that magic. It’s about you now.” That was Les in a nutshell. What could he do for you? What could he do to help you? I really hope you enjoy this record as much as we did making it. This is all about a real love and respect for Les. When you listen to it, just let the laughter you hear starting everything off echo in your head, because that’s what it was like to be with Les… and:

Don’t forget to love yourself.

- **Adam Dorn**

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It was barely a month before his passing that I was sitting in the dressing room at Birdland, FaceTiming with Les McCann just before hitting the stage. Two hours earlier we'd been chatting by FaceTime in my hotel room. I told Les that I had to go because it was time for me to take a shower so that I could make it to the gig on time. "How are you going to play funky if you take a shower?" he asked, and we both laughed. Now, post-shower and just a few minutes before showtime, Les was beaming, totally thrilled with palpable excitement when I told him the show was sold out. "Joe," he said. "You da man." "No, Les," I responded. "You da man." To which Les exclaimed, "We da man!"

"I wish I could be there with you tonight," Les told me. To which I replied, "Me too. But I'll be thinking of you and playing your music." "Our music," he quickly corrected me. "Our music," he repeated, more seriously this time. "We're a team. Say it." "Our music," I said back to him.

"Amen," he said.

And that was Les: my piano hero turned mentor, soul brother, and best buddy, who, despite being nearly sixty years older than I — and a bona fide music legend — would always go out of his way to make sure that I knew that he felt that our journeys are deeply intertwined and connected.

Once, we were doing an interview together and were asked about when and how we first met. I told the interviewer all about that day at the Blue Note in 2012, when a 23-year-old me got to open for Les; he approached the piano and, in lieu of a greeting, told me to, "Play me some blues, boy." While I was worried about what I – a white, Jewish millennial – could offer Les, one of the greatest blues players ever, I did my best, trying not to let fear enter my mind. After a minute or two, Les said, "Amen," and I breathed a sigh of relief. When I finished playing, Les asked my name.

"Joe Alterman," I replied.
"Alterman," he said, before asking, "You a Rabbi?"
"No," I told him through my laughter. "But I am a…"
"Hebrew?" he interrupted.
Through my laughter again: "Yeah."
"Well, from now on, you're my He-bro." And that, I told the interviewer, was the start of our beautiful friendship.

Les, however, told the interviewer that the two of us had met in a previous life, recognized each other that day at the Blue Note, and were now back together. He also predicted that in one of our future lives we'll be hanging out, listening to music, and something will come on that will catch our attention, and we'll look at each other and say, "Damn, who is Joe Alterman and Les McCann?"

Ever since that day in 2012 when we connected in this life, barely a day passed in which we didn't speak. Just like the deep resonance I grew up feeling to his music, I resonated just as deeply to the person behind it. It was like having the most beautiful big brother. I was "Little Joe," Les was "Big Mo," and we shared everything with one another — from the ordinary to the extraordinary, the deeply spiritual to the hilarious — both silly and raunchy, sometimes all at the same time.

I remember shortly after meeting, he asked me how often I practiced. "Six hours a day," I told him, almost bragging—very proud of that fact at the time. "Way too much!" was his immediate

response, which caught me off guard; you don't expect your piano hero to tell you that you're practicing too much!

"You need to go out and live more, so that you have something to sing about when you get to the piano," he told me.

He continued, "And when you practice, don't just practice songs all the time. Practice how you're going to play a song. Practice why you're going to play a song. I don't mean to make it intellectual, but it's about teaching your fingers and your heart to work together. The mind is just trying to be in control of everything, but music – and especially people who love their music – it comes from the heart."

To me, Les was both a wise old man and the most playful child all in one. In fact, just recently I was telling him how he reminded me of the way that I saw the Dalai Lama: an enlightened being who never lost his childlike wonder and enthusiasm. "I like that," Les said.

Les was bedridden for at least five of the twelve years that I knew him. We spoke around six hours each week during all of those years, and he complained maybe three times total. In fact, I can only think of a handful of times he didn't say things were either "beautiful" or "just a touch above "perfect" when I'd ask how he was doing, despite his being bedridden, unable to play the piano and living in a rehab center where he shared his room with a variety of interesting characters. Les certainly made the best of a bad situation; he used his time in bed to train his mind to focus on that which he wanted to think about.

Not unlike an enlightened being such as the Dalai Lama, Les is the only person I ever met who really had control of his mind and could think about what he wanted to think about, when he wanted to think about it. He had a beautiful philosophy about the meaning of life, and he loved to share it with me often. He always saw the bright side in everything. Once, when I visited him in the rehab center and had to use the restroom, I got lost in the halls of the facility. When I finally made it back to Les, I told him what had happened and he just started laughing. "Hah! You have to find a bathroom when you need to go! I just go."

We had a lot of fun together. Les would regale me with incredible stories from his amazing career, and I'd ask him advice and tell him all about my gigs and escapades. Although we both knew that Les would probably never get out of his bed again, we used to make plans for our one-day duo show together. We'd create set lists, I'd make lyric books and mail them to Les, and we'd rehearse over the phone. One time, Les had a particularly funny idea for the show: "You do the work, I'll take the bows."

Via FaceTime, I'd take Les on hikes and walks around the various cities I'd visit, alternating the direction of the screen between my face and the scenery — and whenever I'd turn the camera back towards my face, he'd always make some hilarious comment about how painful that transition was. We'd make plans for Les 'dream restaurant: Give Me Some Skin, he wanted to call it, and it would only serve meat skins."Fish skin, chicken skin sandwiches, vegetable skins, pig skins," he'd tell me, often adding, "and milk" – skim.

We had a ball getting on FaceTime, with me surprising someone by handing them the phone and saying, "Meet Les McCann." Catching big fans of Les' off-guard was always a hilarious interaction for me and the ever-playful Les, and I always appreciated the times when those funny moments would turn into something deep, reminding me of the fun yet deeply serious nature of this music I feel honored to play and share a love for with Les. One time I was

FaceTiming with Les and introduced him to two musicians with whom I was playing that night. Both my necktie and that of one of the musicians was tied tightly, but one musician's tie was very loose. Les looked at him and said, "You look like you just got home from work and are ready to crack open a beer. You've got to fix your tie and show some respect for this music. People have died for this music."

He once told me that, "Jazz is not about entertaining an audience. It's about expressing who you are on a very deep level. It's like what Reggie Workman said: 'Jazz is a matter of life and death.'"

Sometimes I'd bring him on stage with me by FaceTiming him and laying the phone next to the piano. He'd always be smiling and cheering me on, and it was always so special and fun to look over and see the joy he felt in watching and listening to me — which meant so much to me. When I first discovered Les 'music as a teen, my life was changed forever. I was a big fan of blues and bluegrass who happened to fall in love with jazz piano, and there was something in Les 'Kentucky-influenced, country-tinged sound that hit me hard and resonated deeply – an incredibly exciting, inspiring, and refreshing moment in my life, for that reason and also because, at the time, there were a lot of things I was being told not to do on the piano. But Les was doing nearly all of them, and he sounded so good! In being true to himself, Les gave me the confidence to be true to myself.

While I was at first excited that we met so that I could learn to play like him, Les quickly made me realize that trying to sound like him was missing the point - as was everyone telling me not to do all of those things on the piano that Les sounded so good doing! "There's always going to be the naysayers," he said. "But what you've got to do is say, 'I hear you, but this is my story, my movie, not yours. This ain't about you.'"

Shortly before we met, I was opening for Hiromi at the Blue Note in New York. Another hero pianist, Ahmad Jamal, was in the audience, and it was the first time I'd performed for one of my heroes. It was exciting that he was there, listening intently to my set, but I spent nearly the entire performance in a state of crippling anxiety. For much of the weeks that followed, I felt embarrassed, shattered, and confused. I hadn't been able to keep my fear from getting in the way of the music, which had, in my eyes, ruined the evening's performance.

I eventually shared that story with Les, and he told me that he had a similar story that he wanted to share with me. He was about the same age that I had been at the time, and he was about to walk on stage for his first big Chicago gig at the London House, when Oscar Peterson walked in and took a seat. Les felt similar nerves that I later felt playing in front of Jamal.

"I went over to say hello to him," Les recalled. "I sat down for a second to talk to him, and I told him, 'I love you, Oscar, but I don't know if I can play in front of you. I'm so nervous, I can't believe it. 'Oscar looked at me and said something that changed my life. He said, 'I didn't come here to hear me. I came here to hear you. 'He was telling me to be myself, and that calmed me for the rest of my life. It was a moment of saying that I never have to fear what I do myself again… Without that experience, I'd have probably been fearful for some time longer. I'd have had to learn that anyway, eventually, but that's what I learned on that spot and at that moment. I never looked back after that, either." And after hearing that story, neither did I.

Another time we were talking about Oscar and he joked, "I always wondered where he got a piano that could do all that." Another time he said, "Oscar Peterson and Art Tatum. I can't do

that but I don't want to do that. It's not me.” He always encouraged me to continue the search for my true self through music.

Regarding the piano, he said, "The piano is just a tool. Without that piano, without those fingers, you would still be hearing music. You've got to hear what's in you! And by the way, you already know this stuff. You knew all this at birth. I'm just here to remind you of it and help you tap into it.”

He told me amazing stories about so many greats:

Mose Allison, who got mad at Les when a group of musicians visited the Pope at the Vatican and Les greeted the Pope with, “What's happening, baby?”

Coleman Hawkins, who was sick of playing his hit song “Body and Soul,” and instructed Les to say he didn't know the tune when anyone requested it. After an irate fan called Les a “motherfucking liar” when Les said he didn't know the tune, Coleman took a pitcher and hit the man over his head, knocking him out. (“Coleman was old school,” Les told me. “He came from the day when everybody carried a switchblade and didn't take shit off nobody.”)
Miles Davis, who interrupted a recording session to ask Les to speak with his son. “Sure,” Les said, and Miles pulled out $500, about to hand it to Les. Confused, Les asked, “Where's your son?” “In St. Louis. Let's go,” Miles told him — to which Les said, “Motherfucker, I am not going to St. Louis."

Herbie Mann, who stopped a record date to ask Les if he could, “Play like a regular piano player,” after which Les asked him to clarify what that meant. When Herbie said to, “Just lay the chords down,” Les asked Herbie if he knew any pianists who could play like that, to which Herbie said yes. Les said, “Well, hire them. I'm leaving,” and he did.

Oscar Peterson, whose left hand was severely impaired by a stroke,. He called Les after a stroke severely impaired Les 'right hand and said, “Let's go on the road together as one good pianist!”

Leroy Vinnegar, who corrected the Rabbi giving the eulogy at the funeral for original Lighthouse Café owner John Levine; the Rabbi kept pronouncing his name “Le-vyne” and Leroy yelled out, “It's Leveen, motherfucker!”

Philly Joe Jones, who Les said playing with “makes you feel like you're playing in the middle of a thunder storm. You cannot fall. All you gotta do is ride the wave.”

I could go on and on. I learned so much from him, and I'll forever miss his teachings and his never-ending plethora of incredible stories, but I'll miss the fun we had most.

He called me every Mother's Day with the same message: “Happy Mother's Day, motherfucker!” and he gave me advice to, “Never call your own mother a motherfucker,” although being called a motherfucker by Les is one hell of an honor. “I only call people motherfucker that I love,” he told me, before continuing: “Motherfucker is the most flexible word in the English language.” To illustrate this point, he said the following sentence: “This motherfucker came by my motherfucking house the other day, and I told this motherfucker, 'What motherfucker do you think you are, motherfucker? Just pay me my motherfucking money, and I'll stop bothering with your motherfucking ass. Okay?'”

Les had a few health scares in his final years, and there were four or five times he called to say goodbye—only to thankfully bounce back. We didn't get to say goodbye when he actually passed. But that first farewell will always stand out as the real one:
Les: Call me tomorrow or the next day. But if I'm not here, I want to thank you for all of your love.
Me: And I want to thank you for all of yours.
Les: Motherfucker. [Click]

Despite his telling me to be happy for him when he finally passed on and "went home," losing Les was an incredibly difficult experience for me. Not only had I lost my best buddy and my hero, but being that we had spoken for nearly an hour every day in Les 'last twelve years (and that Les was the most refreshing and fun person ever to talk to!), being thrown into a life without our daily chats not only left a huge void in my life, but was a huge life change, too.

However, I started seeing and/or feeling nearly daily reminders, moments, and/or "coincidences" that made me feel Les 'presence almost every day. Over time, it began to feel less like Les was gone - and more like he's always here.

One of those moments was meeting Adam Dorn, one of Les 'favorite motherfuckers and the son of perhaps Les 'all-time favorite motherfucker, Joel Dorn, who sadly passed away in 2007. Les used to speak with me often about both, and the timing and the way in which Adam came into my life didn't feel like a mere coincidence; it felt like Les 'doing.

Adam felt like family from the moment we met. From our first conversation I felt that same feeling of refreshing fun that I'd been missing since losing Les. Not only that, but we shared so much - both very similar thoughts and feelings about music, but also a history and a friendship with Les. That said, working on this album with Adam was not only fun, it was therapeutic.

Les once told me about a radio interview where the DJ, implying that Les was selling out with his then-new release by playing funk music, asked Les why in the world he would ever play that kind of music. Les 'response: "For the first three letters: F.U.N."

I've long felt that jazz is in need of more fun, as has Adam, and I'm deeply thankful to the immortal spirit of Les McCann for bringing Adam and I together to create this dream of a project, one of the most special, meaningful - and fun! - projects I've ever been a part of.

- **Joe Alterman**

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It was such an honor when Joe and Adam asked me to print up some of my old black-and-white photos of Les for this amazing project! It's fitting, because it was photography that first created the bond that Les and I shared for over 40 years. I'm not a musician, but I love music and when my aunt came home from college with Swiss Movement by Les McCann and Eddie Harris, I became a fan of jazz at age 12. Years later, when I got the chance to meet Les, I was happy to tell him how he had influenced my musical tastes. But before I could even tell him, we had an instant connection that he later described as, "knowing you from another lifetime." We quickly discovered that we both loved photography and Nikon cameras. When I sent him some of my photos, he invited me into a photo exhibit in San Francisco that showcased his work, along with the work of jazz drummer Billy Cobham. He was so encouraging and supportive. We would walk the streets of San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Boston, wherever our

paths would cross over so many years, taking photos and printing together in our darkrooms when we had the chance. His photos were remarkable and intimate, capturing the humanity he saw in all people. He said, "Music is photography and photography is music." Since I often had my camera with me while hanging out with him, I had the opportunity to take a lot of images of Les: playing music, goofing around, always having a good time.

My friendship with Les was such a joy and a blessing. He was so wise, always interested in the details of my life and always hilarious. He was an amazing athlete and loved tennis and basketball, so we'd always find time to play both sports when we hung out. And we inevitably ended up doubled over in laughter. He was so fun. He would write me letters over the years, telling me about his gigs and his travels from various cities around the country and around the world. But he always wanted to know about me. "How are your kids? How are your parents?" He truly cared about others. When my father was sent to the emergency room toward the end of his life, I called Les from outside the hospital and told him I was scared. He told me, "Just go in and hold his hand. It's all about love."

Toward the end of his life, in his final few years, Les and I reconnected after losing contact for a few years. At that time, ours also became a connection over the phone, talking at least a couple times a week. We had so much fun remembering so many great times that we shared over the years. Les said reconnecting was, "like being at the park!" The park was where he would play tennis with his buddies in L.A. – a playground of sorts. I loved hearing his stories about his early life. Some were about famous people and some were about growing up in Kentucky. He told me about playing the sousaphone in middle school and walking the long walk home, playing his sousaphone for all the neighbors as they would wave from their porches. He told me about how he loved his mother, and bought her a pink Cadillac when he first made money, even though she didn't know how to drive and crashed it into a tree. She was fine but the pink Cadillac was totaled.

He was a prankster. Once in high school, the janitor asked him to be his straight man for a talent show. He told Les all he had to do was stay quiet and keep a straight face. Les said he got on stage, and instead of keeping a straight face he burst into laughter and couldn't stop laughing, unable to proceed with the show. The school's band members teased him about it. So, in retaliation, while they were getting dressed behind the curtain for a school show, Les opened the curtains for the whole school to see them undressing! Another time, he told me about playing a gig where the venue owner was racist. Les had a choir with him. So instead of having the choir sing, "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" he had them sing to the same tune, "Motherfucker! Motherfucker! Motherfucker!" He was a great storyteller, and had a great memory to the end. But he was never full of ego; he just wanted to share a good laugh, and was always interested in the details of my days. It said a lot about him, a man so talented and successful, but still humble and able to connect to anyone with a smile and an open heart.

Les was the most remarkable spirit I've ever known. Confined to a bed on his back in a state-run rehab facility during his last years, he remained so upbeat. He maintained such a joy for life, even in such difficult circumstances. He would paint as long as he could (he was a very talented painter), he would talk with friends, make music with Joe, and close his eyes and travel to other places. He was a gifted soul who knew life was precious, temporary, and something to be enjoyed every day. He taught me so much. Some of the lessons he taught me included:

"All that is real and matters is love. We are all made from love. But don't forget to love yourself."

“We are all born with all the knowledge we need. We just forget it. We need to be still and remember in our hearts what we once knew.”

“Don’t be afraid of death. We just go home and return to being angels. You’re my angel. And I’m your angel.”

“We have two choices in life: fear or love. Let go of fear. Choose love.”

"Say ‘Yes’"

“In a place where the heart is, love is expected to conquer all. But it’s the actions of the people who love that make it everlasting.”

A few years ago, Les said, “I want you to meet my friend, Joe Alterman.” I wasn’t sure why he wanted us to connect, but I reached out and had an instant connection with Joe, despite our age difference. Joe is an old soul, and I’m so grateful for the ways he enriched Les ’life. Shortly before he passed, when Joe played at Birdland in New York City, Les called me after the show to ask about Joe’s performance. I told him about the stories of Les that Joe shared with the audience, about the music he played from Joe Alterman Plays Les McCann: Big Mo & Little Joe. As I was talking, he interrupted and said, “Tell me again what he said about me!” It was touching and clear how much it meant to Les that Joe was sharing the music and stories of Les, keeping him onstage with him. It’s been such a pleasure knowing Joe, sharing funny stories about Les, and mourning together after Les left us in December of 2023. Joe brought Les so much fun and love, and the ability to continue making music.

When Joe shared the work he did with Adam for this project, I was working at my desk. I texted back, “Can’t wait to hear it after work!” Then, a couple minutes later, “Wow! I listened to a bit and I love it!” Then a couple minutes later, “Fuck work! I can’t stop listening!” The music that Joe and Adam have created here is so infectious, so full of joy, and it just hits you in the heart, the place that mattered most to Les. I’m so excited to share my photos of Les for this project I hope they capture the joy Les felt, and the joy he shared with audiences and friends who had the gift of hanging out with him. The music here is a tribute to that love and joy – the essence of Les McCann!

- **Sharon Josepho**, Executive Producer

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CREDITS

Mocean Worker - Electric Bass, Electric Guitar, Drum Programming, Hand Claps, Midid Zither, Synths, Wurly, Clavinet and just SOME Piano (Not the amazing stuff, that's Joe!)

Joe Alterman - Piano, Rhodes, Wurly, Clavinet, iPhone, Soup Spoons

Les McCann - Spoken Word, Laughter, The best vibes ever

Sharon Josepho - Execulive Producer

Kelsey Roberts - Art and Design

Produced, Arranged, and Mixed by **Adam Dorn** and **Mocean Worker** @ THE DORNMITORY (THE STUDIO IN THE WOODS)

Digital Mastering by **Gene Paul** @ **G&J Audio**

Vinyl Mastering by **James Bernard** @ **Ambient Mountain House**