

Aug. 7, 1994

ST. LOUIS, Mo.-- Percussionist Charles Neville awoke around dawn before a recent concert here. He left his hotel in the historic Union Station complex and walked several blocks to the banks of the Mississippi River.

He walked alone.

This year marks the 20th year since Mardi Gras Chief George "Uncle Jolly" Landry called his nephews together in a summit that eventually resulted in formation of the Neville Brothers. Landry was a New Orleans seaman and piano player who occasionally stayed with the Neville family. He led the Wild Tchoupitoulas, a spiritual musical aggregation that was influenced by street rituals of black Indian tribes. The Wild Tchoupitoulas were named for the street running by the docks of the Mississippi in New Orleans.

"I looked at the river and thought about the music coming up from New Orleans," Neville said. "I thought about George. There were always colorful stories about when he went to sea. He was a sharp dresser; he always looked like he was into something different. I thought about my father. He could sing, but he could really whistle. He would whistle Charlie Parker solos. And my mother played the banjo if there was one around."

On the road The Neville Brothers are up and down the river and on the road to support "Live on Planet Earth," their first live album in a decade. The hybrid of Chief Jolly's Indian Chants, Afro-Caribbean rhythms and New Orleans soul is being spread everywhere.

In St. Louis, the brothers opened for country star Wynonna. On Friday, they'll hook up with Wynonna again at the Indiana State Fair in Indianapolis.

The rigors of the road are nothing new for 55-year-old saxophonist Charles Neville, the second-oldest member of the band. (Rhythm and blues keyboardist Art Neville is 56.) Charles cut his chops as a member of the house band at the historic Dew Drop Inn before leaving New Orleans at 15.

He traveled with blues piano player Tiny Brown in 1954 before joining the Rabbit Foot Minstrel Show that barnstormed the mid-South. Established in 1929 in Port Gibson, Miss., the traveling organization carried 50 people, including 25 musicians. While on the minstrel show circuit, Neville crossed paths with blues artists like Jimmy Reed, Little Walter and Willie Mae Thornton.

"The minstrel show was just like a circus," Neville recalled. "We all had to pitch

these big tents in fields. There were all kinds of different attractions - comedians, dancers, acrobats and sideshows with Siamese twins. There were two peg-leg dancers, Peg Leg Moffett and Peg Leg Gates, and a barefoot tap dancer named Ironjaw. We played in the blues tent, under two big banners with pictures of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. I later found out that they both had worked with that show."

Charles is also one of the two Neville brothers to be incarcerated after testing the road. He was busted for shoplifting in 1958, and did hard time from 1964-67 in the Louisiana State Prison at Angola for possession of a couple of marijuana cigarettes. In the late 1950s, lead singer Aaron Neville served six months for auto theft.

That's a long way from Walt Disney World.

Upon his 1967 release, Charles took a course in world religions. He attained a higher spiritual perspective toward life. To this day, Neville is a devotee of t'ai chi ch'uan, the Chinese form of exercise or attack and defense. It developed from the cornerstones of the Chinese philosophy t'ai chi, the harmonizing of yin and yang.

"One thing that impacted everything I do was learning about the wheel of life or the law of karma," Neville said. "The Western mind is so enamored of science and has the misconception that science and spirituality are two opposing things. I learned the basic laws of science and basic laws of religion or spirituality are the same - the law of cause and effect and law of conservation of energy and matter. All the scriptures said there is a creator who always was and always will be. This creator exists as energy. That was a revelation that started me looking at things differently."

Neville became interested in physics in grammar school. The spiritual reawakening had a profound effect on his music, an intense mixture of jazz and funk with subtle classical shades.

"It didn't seem to me that music was really man-made," Neville said. "That was something I already felt about music. It seemed that music came from somewhere else, and we were channels that it could flow through. Especially in studying classical music and reading descriptions by some of the great composers how they got inspiration to write. Some stuff was based on the formulas that were taught in the conservatories, but the guys who got kicked out of conservatories became the greatest composers because they didn't follow a formula.

"They wrote the stuff that came to them. When I play, improvisation is instant composition."

The Neville Brothers' music knows no boundaries. "Live on Planet Earth" eloquently places each brother in context.

Charles steps out on the beautiful "Her African Eyes." Percussionist Cyril Neville, the band's political and spiritual leader, contributes impassioned lead vocals on "Sister Rosa," a tribute to civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks. Aaron's quivering baritone is featured on his sweet classic "Tell It Like It Is," and Art's traditional New Orleans R & B lines add seasoning to the polyrhythmic album opener, "Shake Your Tambourine."

Over the years, the Nevilles have opened for Crosby, Stills & Nash; Huey Lewis; Jimmy Buffett, and the Rolling Stones. They have no qualms about sharing the stage with a country star like Wynonna.

"With Wynonna, her audience followed her music, but the show wasn't like it was two different kinds of music," Neville said. "What we did was real similar to what she did. It was something heartfelt, something that was meant as truth."