

# DOWNBEAT

*Jazz, Blues & Beyond* SINCE 1934

## Mahal Returns to his Roots at SFJAZZ in San Francisco

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Taj Mahal performed songs inspired by Africa, Caribbean and American rhythms on Feb. 28 at SFJAZZ in San Francisco. (Photo: Rick Swig)

Taking the stage at the SFJAZZ Center's Miner Auditorium with his trio on Feb. 28, Taj Mahal was resplendent in his customary Hawaiian shirt, Panama hat and a diamond stud earring that glistened in the spotlight.

Seated on a stool before an array of instruments—several acoustic guitars, including his trusty resonator, a hollow-body electric, banjo, ukulele and digital keyboard—he selected a steel-stringed acoustic, fingerpicking a gentle, kalimba-like pattern to conjure up the right mood. “I’d like to take the time to connect with the ancients,” he said.

One of America’s most essential blues artist of the last half-century, Henry Saint Clair Fredericks changed his name to Taj Mahal in the early 1960s; the idea reportedly came to him in a dream. Now 72, he has devoted a long career to excavating his blues roots, in the process uncovering, with a musicologist’s relish, related African-diaspora traditions, including American folk, Caribbean styles like reggae and calypso, zydeco,

Latin and, in a slight departure, even Hawaiian music, reflecting his years living there. None of it was bound to make him a commercial success.

Yet along the way, Mahal became a critically acclaimed blues-rock icon and a two-time Grammy winner. Last fall he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Americana Music Association.

When he entered the wild San Francisco rock scene of the late 1960s with his band The Rising Sons (with Ry Cooder), it wasn't that audiences hadn't heard these 12-bar blues before. He just sang and played them with more energy, imagination and conviction—indeed, more authenticity—than they were accustomed to hearing.

Mahal has lived in the Bay Area since 1971. It's where he rose to fame, playing shows at the legendary Winterland Ballroom and Fillmore West in their late '60s/early '70s heyday. It was not surprising that his four-night engagement at the SFJAZZ Center was a sellout.

He began with “Zanzibar,” from his 2005 album *Mkutano*, in which he intones the names of African countries, as if to summon the ancestors. Afterward, he told an anecdote about submitting a sample to the website AncestryDNA, which tests customers' DNA and provides personal details about their ethnic origins: “The results came back [that I'm] 93 percent African, but spread all over the continent—Cameroonians, Ghanaians, Beninians, Malians. So I said, ‘Oh, that's why I hear all this music.’”

Mahal is a storyteller—part bluesman, part shaman. At SFJAZZ, he leaned heavily on his most popular songs, many of them from his early albums, especially *The Natch'l Blues*, including classics like “Fishin' Blues,” “Corrina,” “Done Changed My Way Of Living,” “Good Morning Miss Brown” and “Queen Bee.”

The majority of the songs he chose were well-suited to the format of his solid longtime trio of Kester Smith (drums) and Bill Rich (bass). Although this stripped-down instrumentation offered back-to-basics appeal, it did not enhance the presentation of some of Mahal's most interesting and diverse material, such as the extraordinary Caribbean-derived tunes, “Why Did You Have To Desert Me?” and “(Clara) St. Kitts Woman,” or some of the African-inspired material included in his collaboration with the Malian kora virtuoso Toumani Diabaté.

Nor did it allow him the proper backing for his eloquent gospel singing, which showed up in his performance of “Just A Closer Walk With Thee” on Eric Clapton and Wynton Marsalis' *Play The Blues* concert album, released in 2011.

Humor is central to Mahal's music and showmanship. Many of his lyrics are quirkily funny, full of rural wisdom and sometimes risqué references (“Bring It With You When You Come,” for example). Introducing a song written by one of his idols, Mississippi

John Hurt, he said, “It takes Daddy a while to get warmed up, but when he does, send the kids to Grandma’s house!”

He then kicked the show into a higher gear with Hurt’s “Satisfied ’N’ Tickled, Too,” half-whispering the seductive lyrics and leavening his guitar solo with jazz-influenced chords and colors. For an encore, he delivered a touching version of Gerry Goffin and Carole King’s “Take A Giant Step,” along with his classic blues shouter, “She Caught The Katy (And Left Me A Mule To Ride).”

Reflecting on his career, he said, “All these years I’ve been listening to my muse. I don’t care if I’m not bubbling under the Hot 100.” Amen.

—Allen Morrison

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