



Amplify With Lara Downes

Jon Batiste traces the blues back to Beethoven and beyond

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Lara Downes



Credit: NPR

One afternoon back in December 2020 when *Amplify* was just a fledgling show – a point of connection via video chat for artists unmoored by the pandemic shutdown and that year's racial upheaval – I welcomed [Jon Batiste](#) as one of my very first [guests](#).

We didn't know each other then – with the exception of messaging on Instagram after Jon had shared one of my [Florence Price](#) recordings – as we began a correspondence about the lineage of Black composers and personal reflections on the challenges of that strange time. Of all the artists I spoke to that year, Jon seemed perhaps the most aware of staying centered in a kind of grace despite the chaos and crisis around us – of the need to look beyond the troubles of the present, open to the possibility of whatever would come next.

He's been in motion ever since. He left his position as bandleader on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* to focus on his own creative projects, and released two adventurous albums that launched him into pop-star orbit. He married his longtime partner, the writer [Suleika Jaouad](#). He conducted the premiere of his orchestral composition *American Symphony* at Carnegie Hall, an event documented in a film of the same name that follows his creative process with the symphony while confronting the devastating return of Suleika's leukemia.

This is a lot of change in just a few years. An Oscar, a Golden Globe, five Grammys (including Album of the Year), the restoration of a 19th century [townhouse](#) in Brooklyn, and several rescue dogs later, Jon has made a graceful circle back to his musical beginnings. His newest album is inspired by Beethoven's music – pieces he learned from his childhood piano teacher Miss Shirley back home in Metairie, La.

So we circled back as well, into our conversation about our musical and human lineages – back to Beethoven and beyond – about accepting change and listening to the constant heartbeat of hope, even in hard times.

In 2024, life in America is as tumultuous as ever. And Jon Batiste is moving fast, as always. But he's centered amidst the swirl, tracing his history, following his heart and keeping in tempo with the pulse of the here and now.



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