HENRY CLEMENT & GUMBO

BIG CHIEF TAKAWAKA

FLY CD 52
1. HEY LA BA
2. BLACK WIDOW SPIDER
3. WEEPING WILLOW
4. PANDEMONIUM
5. CROSS THAT RIVER
6. BIG CHIEF TAKAWAKA
7. WHAT'S UP
8. GUMBO BAND GOT SOUL
9. GIVE ME SOME LAGNIAPPE
10. CATAWBA TREE
11. MY DOLL CAN'T DANCE
12. PLAYIN' IN THE WATERLILY
13. LONG LONG ROAD
14. PRETTY GIRL
15. GUMBO
16. SIT TIGHT
17. GOING TO NEW ORLEANS
18. I'M SO IN LOVE WITH YOU
All songs by Henry Clement and Gumbo except 4 and 8 which are by Clarence Taylor and Gumbo.
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Henry Clement
by Opal Louis Nations

Henry Clement, or Big Chief Takawaka, the swamp doctor, as he jokingly calls himself, is one heck of a performer. His comedy routines on stage are as wacky as his costumes which he has custom-made. A regular street festival performer, Henry dons his blue Indian costume and head-dress of many feathers (looking rather like a scaled-down version of one worn by The Wild Magnolias) and joins the Crescent City's Mardi Gras parade. Currently a Career Counselor for The Oakland Unified School District in Oakland, Henry's main source of income is teaching kids to stay away from drugs and off the streets.

In addition to this collection of Henry's work, two cassettes of fairly recent material are available. The first, titled "Louisiana Blues & Zydeco, Vol. 2" (Volume One remains in the can), recorded in 1986 at Jay Miller's Masters-Trak Enterprise Studios, contains blues and zydeco songs which Henry states "are from personal experience." His second, again a joint venture with J.D. Miller who controls a more than healthy share in the deal, contains a lion's share of jump and ballad-tempo blues, called "Gumbo," after the group's name. This 1991 recording, again cut at J.D.'s in Crowley, features Henry's current Band of Fred Arceneaux--rub board, vocals, and keyboards; Alvin Chaffers--percussions; Ron Briggs--tenor; Rick Banker--lead guitar; Jim "Boom Boom" Hite--bass guitar and piano; Clarence Taylor--alto; Sidney Ford--tenor, flute, and keyboards; Sam Banker--percussions; John Meyers (who is both kazoo player and business manager); Brian Clement--bass, drums, and arrangements, and of course Henry on accordion, harmonica, keyboards, and lead vocals.

Henry enjoys going home to Crowley each year to stay in touch with his four brothers with whom he retains close ties. Born November 8, 1935, Henry is the grandson of plantation proprietors in St. Martinville, La. Growing up in Crowley's French section, Henry for the most part spoke French in the home of his parents, Rodney and Georgiana Clement. Taking musicians like Willie "Soon" George and Marcel Dugar as examples, young Henry picked up the fundamental rudiments of piano, harmonica, and drums. He played at professional dances throughout Louisiana, Texas, and Mississippi before the age of ten. Henry states that he made his recording debut on J.D. Miller's Feature label in 1954 playing on a Lightning Slim session in place of Wild Bill Miller who could not make the date (See sleeve notes to Flyright LP 583.) Henry remembers the other musicians as being Sam Drake (drums) and Earl Joseph (bass). Pianist Katie Webster was also on hand. (Both Joseph and Webster are absent on the issued titles.) In the cassette notes to "Gumbo," Jay Miller explains the desperation of a situation where a harp player had to be found at the very last minute. "I learned on Monday that the harmonica player, who was from Beaumont, would not be able to show. Henry arrived at the studio as usual that afternoon, and I asked if he could play harmonica.. He stated he had never tried. I reached into a display case and pulled out a marineband, handed it to him, and said, 'Learn to play it because you're gonna play harmonica tomorrow night on a L. Slim Session.' On the next

night, believe me, not only did he play on the session, he played great." The result was "I can't live happy" / "New Orleans bound" -- Feature 3008.

At St. Teresa Elementary School, Henry had won a number of talent shows, and during his high school years he was honored with the accolade of being number one percussionist four consecutive years. Graduating from Ross High, Henry won a full music scholarship to Southern University based in Baton Rouge. It was during study at S.U. that Henry formed his first college band, later referred to as The Drops of Joy or Gaynotes Band. The band held together for four years (1954-58.) members included Joe Ewell (tenor), Ritchie Graham (trumpet), ? Stimsley (bari), and Henry on drums. The band played school socials and small local gigs behind lead vocalist Berdel Washington whose sister Bernadine oft times fronted the Gaynotes doo-wop group behind which the band performed. The original Gaynotes vocal group consisted of James Butler, Morris Roberts, and Andrew Stokes. Sometimes the outfit performed with the campus Swing Band. In 1958 the group changed names to The Dew Drops and added two new members, Charles Chaffers and Edwin Williams.

For Henry, college must have seemed like one continuous musical experience for aside from playing in the college band he performed with The Jazz Band, Concert Band, Marching Band, ROTC Band, Men's Chorus, and Symphony Orchestra. He had served as band leader since high school where he led The Junior Jivers. At college, he formed yet another aggregation, The Trojans Band, whose original members included Sam Drake (drums), the late Earl Joseph (bass), William Angel (tenor), Johnny Mitchell (guitar), the late Issac Bates (tenor), Cleveland Baker (bari), Wilton Baker (trombone) plus Henry on electric piano. The group, founded in 1958, lasted well into the 70s and with personnel changes here and there had enlisted the services of Claudel Glawd (trumpet), Dennis Beaudraux (guitar), and Herman Guidry (drums), among others.

Henry's personal recording career started back in July 1957. Labeled as Little Henry & The Drops of Joy (Gaynotes), he recorded three songs for Jay Miller, only one of which, "Tall skinny Mama" saw belated release on Flyright LP 570 (1981) with Lazy Lester on drumming-box. "Tall skinny Mama" is an excellent example of late 50s swamp doo-wop with its Huey Piano Smith-type piano figures, basic rhythm, and vocal embellishments.

Henry's first single release hit the streets in the summer of 1958, billed as Little Clem & The Drew Drops (Gaynotes) he recorded the plaintive "Plea of Love" -- Zynn 504 (issued on Flyright CD 42 -- Louisiana R & B.) Henry states that on both this and the flip, "Waiting in the chapel," he plays all the instruments, i.e. tenor and alto saxes, guitar, bass, and drums, though I very much doubt his presence in the horn section.

Henry's second single, issued that same year, "Please, please darling" -- Zynn 504 / Rocks 504 -- did fairly well on the local scene and is his best known early recording. Billed simply as Little Henry, his third single, "Jenny, Jenny, Jenny" -- Zynn 513, put out in 1959, also sold well in the bottomlands. All four sides featured the bass voice of Warren Morgan. Henry again insists that he played all the instruments on the actual recordings.

It was during this period that Henry claims he played drums on Charles Sheffield's recording of "Cotton Love" backed by the solid rocking "Shoo shoo chicken" -- Rocko 515 -- with Big Sambo on alto sax (see Flyright LP 608,

1985.) Henry hung around the Crowley studios often--he doesn't remember exactly how many off-session jams he took part in, but it can be safely assumed that Miller taped much of this impromptu material. At least 18 titles are known to exist although Henry states emphatically that no titles were ever affixed to any of the tunes.

Henry's fourth single came about in 1960 with "I'll be waiting" backed by the fabulous "Trojan Walla," an instrumental alternate of which found reissue on Flyright LP 616 -- High School Hop. This time Henry was backed by The Trojan Band. The record met with modest success, but this didn't worry Henry--he had just graduated from Southern University with a Bachelors in math and science. Then began Henry's career in education, working with students in music and math, and counseling while coaching and serving in administrative positions. If Henry never made it as a major musician, he certainly excelled as a student. Henry went on to earn a Masters in Education from Southern U. This was topped in the early 70s, after he had moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, and had successfully written his doctoral thesis in Education at the University of California, Berkeley. "Trojan Walla" was reissued a year later, in 1961, on Spot 1001 with the vocal flip switched from "I'll be waiting" to the more earthy feel of "Late hours blues."

After this, Henry's recording career took a dive, surfacing now and then on Blues Unlimited and various other one-shot deals. At any rate, nothing much happened but Henry always managed to keep a band together and always found time to play during school vacations and weekends behind and in concert with such luminaries as Amos Milburn, Chas Brown, Joe Simon, Bobby Bland, Joe Tex, Barbara Lynn, Ray Charles, James Brown, and B.B. King. The band was then known as The Southern University All Stars. Shortly before moving to California in 1970, Henry picked out certain members of the All Stars and made them members of the original Gumbo Band he took with him to the West Coast.

Henry is married to Margaret from Carencro, La and has four children. Every year Henry climbs aboard his giant luxury mobile home with its large built-in TV/VCR and resplendent sleeping accommodation and takes off on the first leg of his holy pilgrimage to Crowley to touch his roots.

--Opal Louis Nations
From an interview given April 15, 1992