

# TAJ MAHAL



## Profile

Composer, multi-instrumentalist and vocalist Taj Mahal is one of the most prominent and influential figures in late 20<sup>th</sup> century blues and roots music. Though his career began more than four decades ago with American blues, he has broadened his artistic scope over the years to include music representing virtually every corner of the world – west Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, the Hawaiian islands and so much more. What ties it all together is his insatiable interest in musical discovery. Over the years, his passion and curiosity have led him around the world, and the resulting global perspective is reflected in his music today.

Born Henry St. Claire Fredericks in Harlem on May 17, 1942, Taj grew up in Springfield, Massachusetts. His father was a jazz pianist, composer and arranger of Caribbean descent, and his mother was a schoolteacher and gospel singer from South Carolina. Both parents encouraged their children to take pride in their diverse ethnic and cultural roots. His father had an extensive record collection and a shortwave radio that brought sounds from near and far into the home. His parents also started him on classical piano lessons, but after only two weeks, young Henry already had other plans about what and how he wanted to play.

In addition to piano, the young musician learned to play the clarinet, trombone and harmonica, and he loved to sing. He discovered his stepfather's guitar and became serious about it in his teens when a guitarist from North Carolina moved in next door and taught him the various styles of Muddy Waters, Lightnin' Hopkins, John Lee Hooker and Jimmy Reed and other titans of Delta and Chicago blues.

Springfield in the 1950s was full of recent arrivals, not just from around the U.S. but from all over the globe. "We spoke several dialects in my house – Southern, Caribbean, African – and we heard dialects from eastern and western Europe," Taj recalls. In addition, musicians from the Caribbean, Africa and all over the U.S. frequently visited the Fredericks home, and Taj became even more fascinated with roots – the origins of the various forms of music he was hearing, the path they took to reach their current form, and how they influenced each other along the way. He threw himself into the study of older forms of African-American music, which the record companies of the day largely ignored.

Henry studied agriculture at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in the early 1960s. Inspired by a dream, he adopted the musical alias of Taj Mahal and formed the popular U. Mass party band, the Elektras. After graduating, he headed west in 1964 to Los Angeles, where he formed the Rising Sons, a six-piece outfit that included guitarist Ry Cooder. The band opened for numerous high-profile touring artists of the '60s, including Otis Redding, the Temptations and Martha and the Vandellas. Around this same time, Taj also mingled with various blues legends, including Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, Lightnin' Hopkins and Sleepy John Estes.

This diversity of musical experience served as the bedrock for Taj's first three recordings: *Taj Mahal* (1967), *The Natch'l Blues* (1968) and *Giant Step* (1969). Drawing on all the sounds and styles he'd absorbed as a child and a young adult, these early albums showed signs of the musical exploration that would be Taj's hallmark over the years to come.

In the 1970s, Taj carved out a unique musical niche with a string of adventurous recordings, including *Happy To be Just Like I Am* (1971), *Recycling the Blues and Other Related Stuff* (1972), the

GRAMMY®-nominated soundtrack to the movie *Sounder* (1973), *Mo' Roots* (1974), *Music Fuh Ya (Music Para Tu)* (1977) and *Evolution (The Most Recent)* (1978).

Taj's recorded output slowed somewhat during the 1980s as he toured relentlessly and immersed himself in the music and culture of his new home in Hawaii. Still, that decade saw the well-received release of *Taj* in 1987, as well as the first three of his celebrated children's albums on the Music For Little People label.

He returned to a full recording and touring schedule in the 1990s, including such projects as the musical scores for the Langston Hughes/Zora Neale Hurston play *Mule Bone* (1991) and the movie *Zebrahead* (1992). Later in the decade, Taj released a series of recordings with the Phantom Blues Band, including *Dancing the Blues* (1993), *Phantom Blues* (1996), and the two GRAMMY® winners, *Señor Blues* (1997) and the live *Shoutin' in Key* (2000). Overall, he has been nominated for nine GRAMMY® Awards.

During this same period, Taj continued to expand his multicultural horizons by joining Indian classical musicians on *Mumtaz Mahal* in 1995, and recording *Sacred Island*, a blend of Hawaiian music and blues, with the Hula Blues Band in 1998. *Kulanjan*, released in 1999, was a collaborative project with Malian kora player Toumani Diabate (the kora is a 21-string west African harp). He recorded a second album with the Hula Blues Band, *Hanapepe Dream*, in 2003. *Zanzibar*, a European release, followed in 2005.

Taj continues to tour internationally, doing as many as 150 shows per year throughout the U.S., Europe, Australia, New Zealand and beyond.

He joins the Heads Up International label in the fall of 2008 with the worldwide release of *Maestro*. This twelve-track set – his first U.S. release in five years – marks the fortieth anniversary of Taj's rich and varied recording career by mixing original material, chestnuts borrowed from vintage sources and newcomers alike. This anniversary gala includes performances by Ben Harper, Jack Johnson, Angelique Kidjo, Los Lobos, Ziggy Marley and others – many of whom have been directly influenced by Taj's music and guidance.

“The one thing I've always demanded of the records I've made is that they be danceable,” he says. “This record is danceable, it's listenable, it has lots of different rhythms, it's accessible, it's all right in front of you. It's a lot of fun, and it represents where I am at this particular moment in my life. This record is just the beginning of another chapter, one that's going to be open to more music and more ideas. Even at the end of forty years, in many ways my music is just getting started.”