

# AROUND TOWN

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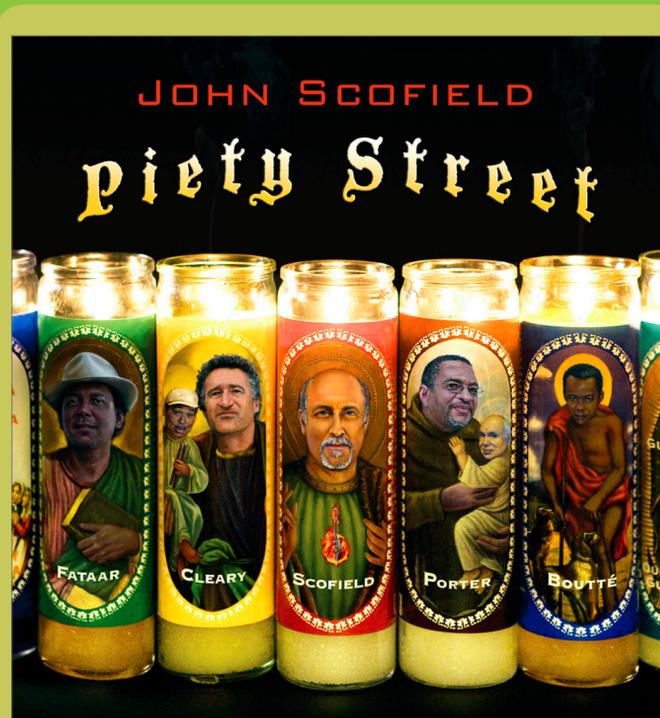
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## Holy Sco!

When world-renowned guitarist John Scofield plays with his gospel-oriented Piety Street Band in Taipei on Tuesday night, he's bringing not just a new sound but an old devotion to music

BY PRESTON D. BAILEY  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER



Above: John Scofield, second from right, with members of his Piety Street Band, from left, bassist George Porter Jr., singer and pianist Jon Cleary and drummer Ricky Fataar. PHOTOS COURTESY OF INTERNATIONAL MUSIC NETWORK

### PERFORMANCE NOTES:

**WHAT:** John Scofield and the Piety Street Band  
**WHEN:** Tuesday at 7:30pm  
**WHERE:** National Concert Hall, Taipei City  
**ADMISSION:** NT\$500, NT\$800 and NT\$2,500 tickets are sold out. NT\$1,200 to NT\$2,000 tickets available through NTCH ticketing or online at [www.artsticket.com.tw](http://www.artsticket.com.tw)

**J**imi Hendrix supposedly once said that music was his religion. When I talked to American guitarist and composer John Scofield, who is performing at the National Concert Hall on Tuesday, about how he came to record his first album of traditional African-American Christian music (known as "gospel"), his devotion, which goes back to his earliest influences, seems to be all about music.

"I've been into R 'n' B and old classic soul grooves my whole life. I mean, I even started out in the 60s as a fan when that music was on the radio," he said from his home in New York last month. "And I became aware of the connection between the people that I liked, their singing, really — Aretha Franklin and James Brown — and gospel music. So I became a fan early on of black church music."

A master of improvisation equally adept at fusion, funk, bebop, R 'n' B and modern blues, Scofield (often referred to as "Sco") first recorded as a sideman with bassist and composer Charles Mingus, then with vibraphonist Gary Burton.

He released his first album, *John Scofield*, in

1977 and later joined legendary trumpeter Miles Davis for three recordings in the mid-1980s. By the end of the decade, Scofield had recorded six more albums as frontman and had established himself as one of the premier improvisational guitarists on the planet.

Scofield chose New Orleans, widely considered the birthplace of jazz, to record his new album, *Piety Street*, and the city figures prominently in his new musical direction.

"I'd been wanting to go to New Orleans and make kind of a more bluesy record. I figured I'd go to New Orleans and play with the guys down there that are experts at that style," he said.

"I wasn't thinking about gospel music. But then when I thought about what we were actually going to play, rather than play a bunch of blues standards, which have been done so much, I thought it would just be different and ... a great idea and great music to play."

"I knew I wanted to have singing on the record before that. And then I thought, well these gospel tunes, they haven't been recorded nearly as much [as a lot of blues standards]. But it gives me the material to play with that blues feel, you know. It certainly wasn't me wanting to make a religious record. It was me wanting to play some bluesy type stuff in New

Orleans," he said.

"Gospel music has the jazz beat. It has these nice chord progressions that are simple, like *When the Saints Go Marching In*, that give you something to really extrapolate on in a jazz-blues way. And it's just the perfect stuff to blow [improvise] on, you know."

Scofield points to native New Orleans singer Mahalia Jackson as the first gospel artist he listened to and credits his mother, also a native of New Orleans, as having introduced him to the city and its culture. But he admits he has no direct roots in gospel music or to the gospel world in general.

"I'm just playing the same gigs I always play. And playing these tunes. And I think some people don't even realize these are

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*"[Gospel] is just the perfect stuff to blow on, you know."*

— John Scofield, guitarist and composer

gospel tunes. They just think 'Wow, that's kind of really bluesy for Scofield.' And so it's like nobody noticed," he said laughing.

He was also surprised when I informed him that *Piety Street* had appeared on Billboard's gospel album charts, the first time in his 35-year recording career. The album stayed there for six weeks.

"You gotta be kidding. You see, that's how out of it I am. I didn't even look," he said. "Fantastic. Well now I'm gospel all the way then, man."

Scofield doesn't shy away from the subject of religion. "I grew up with that code of morality that comes from the Judeo-Christian [tradition]. But I was never particularly religious ... I'm not a member of any organized religion."

"I do like the old stories that come up in these gospel songs and the songs of inspiration. I think I understand why the message of Christianity and of Christ is so incredibly strong and has endured for so long. To say, 'I have nothing to do with religion,' that's wrong. But also, you know, I'm not a Christian."

"I always thought that 'Hey, if I'm spreading that message' — and we are when we play those songs because the singer John Cleary ... when he sings 'I've got Jesus and that's enough' and 'Walk with me, Jesus,' you're spreading the message. So I think, and it's certainly been like this from any [religious] person who has come to the show, that they're thrilled with it. I made it clear on the liner notes to the record that I'm not coming from a particularly religious place, although I'm not an atheist."

"I have no faith in [atheism]," he said. "As a matter of fact I think that's pretty arrogant."

Scofield's guitar style on *Piety Street* is a real departure from his earlier recordings — even his more blues-oriented albums such as *Blue Matter* (1987) and his work with jazz trio Medeski Martin & Wood — as he uses traditional blues guitar techniques like string bending more often.

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