

A Gadabout's Homecoming

An Artist and Musician Returns to New York With Exhibit and Unusual Show

BY ANDY BATTAGLIA

When he isn't looking after the 1,000 pecan trees he tends on a farm in small-town Louisiana, Dickie Landry leads a double life as a New York fixture just now getting his due.

The 73-year-old artist and musician lived in the city from 1969 to 1981 and has been coming back, off and on, ever since. His most recent visit involved the opening of a new gallery exhibit of his work in Chelsea running through mid-April and an unusual engagement earlier this week that found him blowing a saxophone unaccompanied in the reverberant rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum.

"You play a note in there, it goes up and then comes back down," Mr. Landry. "Play three notes and it forms a chord."

The occasions for Mr. Landry's homecoming relate only in part to his prolific output. Over the past few decades, he has garnered credits as a session man on some high-profile recordings and continued to make art in various media. But it's only recently that he has been recognized again for the experimental work of his early years in New York, when he made lasting impressions as a musician, photographer, videomaker and, as per the times, a gadabout around whom such distinctions began to blur.

In the late '60s, he developed a unique style as a saxophonist and flutist, with exploratory inclinations that earned him art-world cache, as well as a gig as a founding member of the Philip Glass Ensemble in 1969. But he served just as actively in other artistic realms, befriending and collaborating with a long list of illustrious names. One was sculptor John Chamberlain, who died in December, just before the opening of the retrospective of his twisted-metal work currently on view at the Guggenheim.

"We would drink and cavort together and scream at people," Mr. Landry said of Chamberlain. "I actually saved his life once. We were drunk off our heads at [Robert] Rauschenberg's, and he pissed off some woman who came at him with an iron skillet. I grabbed her hand. I liked John. I was



Ramsay de Givé for The Wall Street Journal

Dickie Landry performing 'SOLO' at the Guggenheim Museum on March 26

looking forward to seeing him again."

Mr. Landry fanned himself out far and wide in the late 1960s and '70s. His musicianship landed him his job with the Philip Glass Ensemble, but he ventured beyond sound to help build the first gallery show for the steel-plate sculptor Richard Serra. And in his guise as a photographer, he captured a rare image of William Burroughs smiling.

"It's going to be the cover of a book coming out of writings of his that have never been published," he said. "They said nobody has a picture of him smiling."

Other tales from his time in New York, delivered in his Louisiana twang, include a trip in a 1956 Corvette to see Miles Davis at Birdland; a blundered chance to jam with an unknown Jamaican in town who turned out to be Bob Marley; and a day spent roasting a pig on a spit beneath the Brooklyn Bridge with the artist Gordon Matta-Clark.

"In SoHo in the '70s, every-

body knew everybody," he said. "When I first got to New York, within three months I met most of the now-famous art world. Naive from a small town, I figured that was the way it was for everyone. It took me years to realize how lucky I was."

Life is quieter now. Though he kept an apartment in the city until about 10 years ago, Mr. Landry moved back to Louisiana in 1981 after his son was shot and killed in a robbery at a gas station there.

He lives in Lafayette, where he takes care of his pecan trees and sits in sometimes with a zydeco band. His artistic output has remained robust through the decades; connections in New York led to musical work on Paul Simon's album "Graceland" and hit songs by Laurie Anderson and Talking Heads.

But the present has proven poignant for the way it has celebrated Mr. Landry's early years in the city. His current trip here coincides with the opening of "Dickie Landry:

Heart," an exhibition at Salomon Contemporary in Chelsea, where his hypnotic video piece, "1, 2, 3, 4," is on view through April 14. Made in 1969, the work involves footage of hands drumming on foam and clapping beneath a strobe light.

"He comes from within music, so music permeates everything," said Ned Smyth, who organized the show. "There's real rhythm in it."

Then there was his performance at the Guggenheim of "SOLO," for which he filled the museum with his saxophone sounds. It summoned the echo-intensive music he made for "Fifteen Saxophones," an album from 1977 recently issued for the first time on CD and for download by the local label Unseen Worlds. He played alone, to an audience milling around in circles in a contemplative daze.

"I'm always apprehensive about a solo concert because it's so bare-bones," Mr. Landry said afterward. "But I am who I am wherever I go."