

New Orleans songwriter, musician Allen Toussaint dead at 77

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The influential New Orleans songwriter and record producer Allen Toussaint died November 10 at the age of 77. On tour at the time of his death, Toussaint suffered a heart attack following a performance at the Teatro Lara in Madrid, Spain.

Active since the late 1950s, Toussaint had experienced a career revival in recent years. He was touring and recording regularly and, after a lifetime behind the scenes, had begun to receive greater public recognition. A 2006 album with Elvis Costello, *The River in Reverse*, was a strong outing. *The Bright Mississippi* (2009) was an impressive tribute to (mostly) early New Orleans jazz. In 2013, he released *Songbook*, featuring new recordings of many of his classic rhythm and blues songs.

Toussaint was born January 14, 1938 in the working class neighborhood of Gert Town, New Orleans. He was already an accomplished pianist by the mid-1950s, and was even hired to perform the piano parts on Fats Domino recordings when Domino was unavailable for sessions.

Toussaint made his first solo recordings in 1958, under the name Tousan. They were exciting, instrumental rock 'n' roll records much influenced by the great, innovative New Orleans pianist Professor Longhair (Henry Roeland Byrd, 1918-1980). It would be a few years before Toussaint would find real success, however, and it was as a writer and producer for other artists.

In the early 1960s, Toussaint became the house producer, songwriter and session musician for the small Minit record label. During this time he used his mother's maiden name, Naomi Neville, as a pseudonym.

His song "A Certain Girl," recorded by Ernie K-Doe in 1961, was a delight and features one of the most

amusing call-and-response routines in rock 'n' roll. As K-Doe sings of a secret crush, the backup singers want all the gossip: "What's her name?" they demand. "I can't tell you!" he answers. The lovely, slow blues "It's Raining" by Irma Thomas (1962) was more serious, and another of Toussaint's best from this period.

After his career at Minit was interrupted by a two-year stint in the Army, Toussaint returned to New Orleans and founded his own music company, Sansu Enterprises, with collaborator Marshall Sehorn. They intended to create their own version of Motown or Stax in New Orleans. The house band they hired, remarkably, was the now legendary funk group The Meters. Toussaint would produce their solo recordings as well, including the 1969 classic "Cissy Strut."

Around this time, Toussaint embarked on a successful musical partnership with singer Lee Dorsey. "Get Out of My Life, Woman," "Working in the Coal Mine," and "Everything I Do Gonna Be Funky (From Now On)" were just a few of their more noteworthy records.

Dorsey's recording of "Work, Work, Work," while not mentioned quite as often as those, captures the feeling of an urgent but joyless search for a job. While Toussaint, as a songwriter, may not have contributed the most profound statements on these subjects, he often drew from such ordinary life experiences of working people--the struggle to find work, the problem of needing a job and hating it too, and the resulting trouble one gets in while going out at night to blow off steam.

Inspired by the civil rights movement, Toussaint also wrote about the struggle for something better. "Who's Gonna Help Brother Get Further?" is perhaps the best of these. Most, like "Yes We Can" and "Freedom for the Stallion" tend to fall into the "well-meaning"

category.

While writing and producing for other artists, Toussaint also maintained a recording career of his own during the 1970s. His own recordings of his pop and R&B tunes are somewhat less inspired than the more famous renditions by Dorsey and others. Toussaint's voice was just a little too thin and a little too clean.

Worth noting, however, are the purely instrumental performances of his 1970 album *Toussaint*. There is the strutting groove of "Poor Folks," along with its warm interludes on the piano. On "Louie," Toussaint interjects genuinely surprising chords into an already exciting interplay of piano and drums.

As with the compositions of David Axelrod from the same period, Toussaint seemed to be pointing toward more complex and interesting directions in which R&B could go musically. Regrettably, Toussaint never quite developed such work as fully as one would have liked.

In 2005, Toussaint lost both his home and his recording studio, along with all the master tapes of his classic recordings stored there, in the Hurricane Katrina disaster. He relocated to New York and became a kind of musical ambassador for New Orleans.

Toussaint's more recent accomplishments and his association with New Orleans gave President Barack Obama an opportunity to posture as a friend of the devastated city by presenting Toussaint with the National Medal of Arts in 2013. It speaks to the general spirit of conformity, or resignation, that prevails among better-off artistic circles that he accepted it. Not a few of the more prominent musicians of the 1960s and 1970s, including Bob Dylan and Stevie Wonder, have obediently lined up for medals in recent years.

Whatever his limitations, Toussaint has left a lasting influence on contemporary music. The hard-hitting but relatively loose rhythm tracks he worked out with The Meters, in particular, have served as a guide for many musicians who have followed, including the seemingly countless number of hip hop artists who have sampled them.



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