

Remembering Fats Domino

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Singer-pianist Fats Domino died October 24 at the age of 89. He was one of the greats of early rock ‘n’ roll, and probably the best pianist among those early performers. He was also among the first of them to record. Domino’s records appeared just prior to the emergence of Little Richard and well before Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley or Jerry Lee Lewis.

Fats was born Antoine Dominique Domino Jr. on February 26, 1928 in New Orleans. His grandmother, a former slave, served as midwife during his birth. His parents were Creoles with roots in Haiti. Just prior to Domino’s birth, they had relocated to the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans after working the sugarcane plantations around Vacherie, Louisiana. The family spoke French Creole at home and this was Domino’s first language.

Domino did not receive much formal education. He quit school by the fourth grade and immediately went to work as the helper of an ice delivery man. His minimal education and the poverty in which he lived prior to his success as a musician appear to have had a lasting impact on Domino. The future star was also teased a lot for his size and the poor clothes that he wore. A shyness and sense of inadequacy haunted him for much of his life. He perhaps felt himself unsophisticated, though he was an enormously talented artist. He was reluctant to speak his mind in interviews and was more reclusive than other rock ‘n’ rollers of his day.

Domino was working at the Crescent City Bed Factory when his lifelong love of music finally presented the possibility of a career behind the piano instead of the machine. While playing music locally in the evenings, Domino had the good fortune to encounter and form a lasting bond and musical partnership with Dave Bartholomew, the remarkable songwriter, producer and bandleader. Bartholomew wrote or co-wrote much of Domino’s music and

provided him with a team of outstanding musicians, including saxophonist Herbert Hardesty and drummer Earl Palmer who brought New Orleans second-line and parade-style drumming to his sound.

Fats Domino is best known today for a string of hits recorded in the mid-to-late 1950s, including “Ain’t That a Shame,” “I’m Walkin’,” “Blueberry Hill,” “Blue Monday” and “Walking to New Orleans.” These songs were enormously popular. Domino sold an astonishing 65 million records during his career and had dozens of Top 40 hits. In terms of sales, airplay and audience size, he was second only to Elvis Presley among the early rock pioneers. Presley, it’s worth noting, was an ardent admirer of Domino’s work and spoke frequently of the latter’s influence on his own music. The two became friends when they were both performing in Las Vegas during the late 1960s.

Domino’s signature tune “Blueberry Hill” was the unlikeliest of rock ‘n’ roll hits. Written by Vincent Rose, Larry Stock and Al Lewis, it was first recorded by cowboy singer Gene Autry in 1940. It subsequently became a hit for the Glenn Miller Orchestra, which billed it as a Fox Trot. Louis Armstrong sang a version in 1949. But once Domino got his hands on it, the tune became “a Fats Domino song” and always will be that.

Apart from “I’m Walkin’” and the exciting “I’m Ready,” most of these late-50s hits were slow, easy going numbers with Domino pounding out his famous rolling triplets of chords at a fairly relaxed tempo. Domino sang his lyrics in a similarly easy-going manner, in a voice that recalls those one hears when people get a few drinks in them and start explaining life to one another. This was a stark contrast to the more energetic and “threatening” performers of early rock.

Domino’s earlier material, recorded from 1949 onward, too often goes unheard today. It is worth exploring. Domino is more exciting here, his piano playing even more impressive. In those days, Domino

sang in a big bright voice and often used it to imitate harmonica solos. He proved himself to be a more versatile and inventive pianist than either Little Richard or Jerry Lee Lewis. Early songs like “Fat Man,” “Detroit City Blues” and “Domino Stomp” showcase his singing and exquisite piano playing in a way that his later, more famous songs never quite did.

Even now, these and other rock ‘n’ roll classics continue to inspire and excite with each listening, decades after they were first recorded. They have in them some of the confidence and energy of young people in postwar America, when it seemed as though a new generation of kids might actually have an easier life than their parents had. Things were changing. Living standards were improving. Racial barriers were also being challenged. Rock ‘n’ roll brought together “black” R&B and “white” country music and the audiences that went along with them.

Domino’s music captured some of the more relaxed moods of the period when there was, for a brief time at least, some room to stretch out. That looseness and openness is extremely appealing, along with the great forward thrust of so much of that music.

As rock ‘n’ roll became “rock music” and tastes changed in later years, one heard less and less from Fats Domino. His last song of note was probably a 1968 version of The Beatles’ “Lady Madonna,” which had been written by Paul McCartney as a kind of homage to Domino in the first place. While he was a bigger star than many of his contemporaries during the 1950s, Domino tends to be a bit overlooked today.

The 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster brought him back into the public eye. Domino was still living in the Lower Ninth Ward at the time. He remained in his home prior the storm’s arrival. Friends and relatives lost touch with him and assumed the worst. His home was flooded, and he lost many of his possessions, including a grand piano. But Domino survived, though initial reports had suggested otherwise. Someone even painted the words “RIP Fats. You will be missed” on the outside of his home sometime after the Coast Guard rescued him. The news that Domino had been a victim of the flood somehow epitomized the horror of the situation as the US government left the city of New Orleans to drown, along with its rich cultural heritage.

After this, Domino recorded a final album, *Alive and Kickin’*. Proceeds went to provide aid for other

musicians affected by Katrina.

Fats Domino was a wonderful musician. He was forgotten for too many years, as he lived in relative obscurity in New Orleans, long after the heyday of rock ‘n’ roll. He deserves to be remembered... and listened to.



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