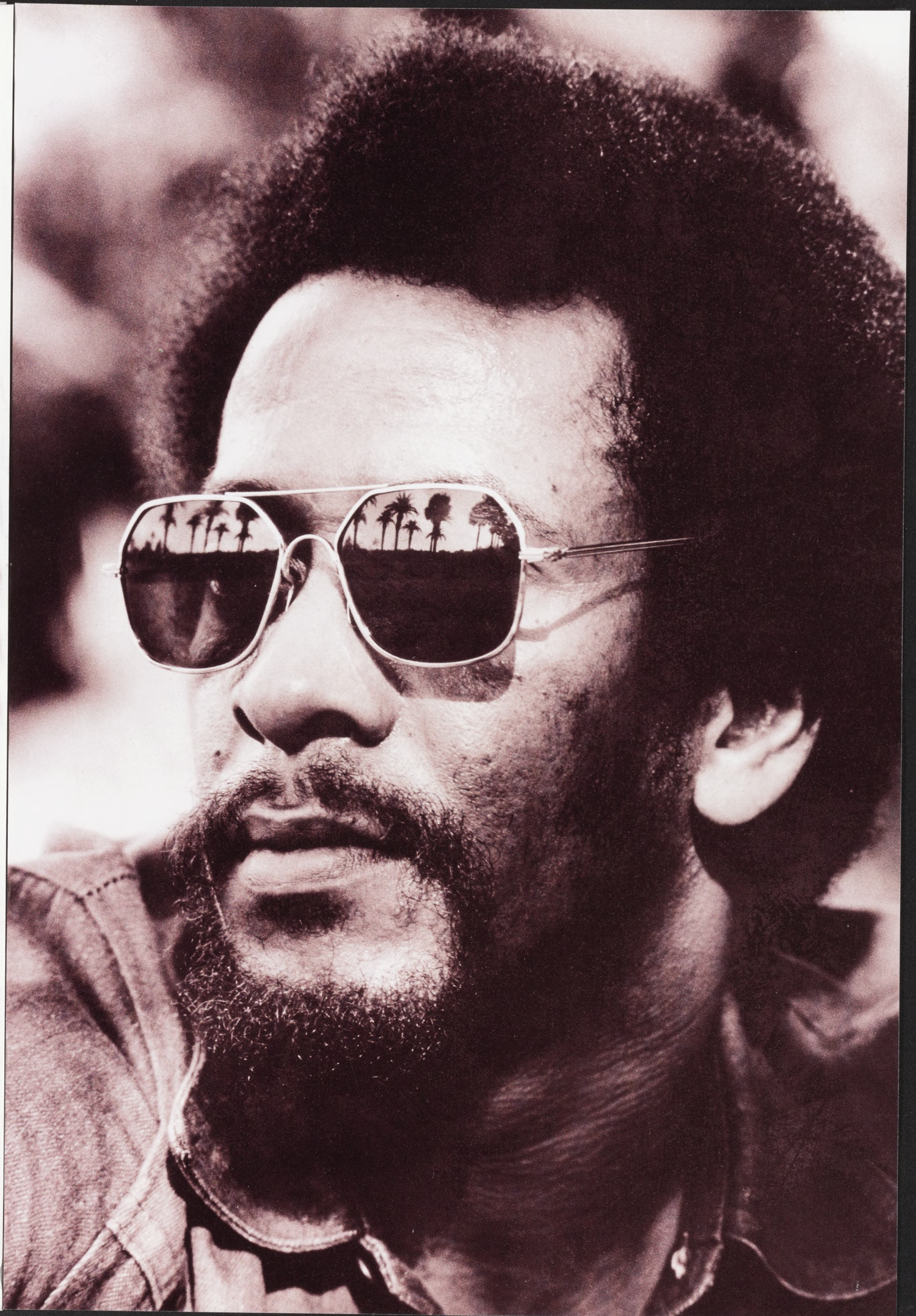


ALLEN TOUSSAINT

FEW SONGWRITERS HAVE SUMMED UP THEIR ARTISTIC PHILOSOPHY as neatly as Allen Toussaint did in his song “Play Something Sweet (Brickyard Blues),” which became a Top Forty hit for Three Dog Night. “Play something sweet,” goes the refrain, “play something funky; make me lay back and grin like a monkey! Play something I can understand!” ☞ The funkiness comes from Toussaint’s hometown of New Orleans, a city where the streets are frequently filled with funeral processions and carnival parades. Fueling the music accompanying both is a hip-shaking syncopation that is absorbed by the city’s residents from the time they’re old enough to tag along after the marchers and form a “second line.” The sweetness of which Toussaint sings, though, comes from his own special genius. Time and again Toussaint has come up with two measures of piano notes so simple and yet so memorable that to merely read such song titles as “Mother-in-Law,” “Working in the Coal Mine” and “Yes We Can Can” is to simultaneously hear the tune. ☞ Above all, Toussaint created songs that were so down-to-earth, so easily understood that their funkiness and sweetness could make any listener – whether a New Orleans dockworker, a Chicago high school student, a Baltimore rock critic or an ex-Beatle – fall over backwards and smile like a besotted chimpanzee on Mardi Gras Day. ☞ Though he never recorded a hit himself, Toussaint wrote, arranged and/or produced hits for Paul McCartney, Otis Redding, the Rolling Stones, Lee Dorsey, Labelle, Robert Palmer, Aaron Neville, the

The man who helped give the city its sound: New Orleans musical visionary Allen Toussaint, 1976





Calling himself *Tousan*, Toussaint recorded an instrumental album in 1958

the fertile New Orleans R&B scene of the Sixties as thoroughly as composer/producer Dave Bartholomew had in the Fifties. In the process, he made the city's distinctive music brighter and more melodic, helping it penetrate every corner of the rock & roll world.

During the 1986 New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, I had the pleasure of spending an afternoon in the Sea-Saint Recording Studios, named after its owners, Marshall Sehorn and Allen Toussaint. Tucked inside an unassuming office building in a quiet, residential neighborhood, the studio walls were

Band, Irma Thomas, Dr. John, the Pointer Sisters, Little Feat, Ernie K-Doe, Bonnie Raitt, the O'Jays and the Judds. Toussaint dominated

"Java" for Al Hirt and "Whipped Cream" for Herb Alpert).

So when Joe Banashak founded Minit Records in 1960 to take advantage of all the untapped talent in New Orleans, the new label hired the twenty-two-year-old Toussaint to be its chief songwriter, arranger and producer. "Early on," he recalled, "my biggest inspiration was Irma Thomas. I could write songs for her day and night without stop. One day it was raining outside and Irma was sitting right there beside me; I put the two together and came up with that 'drip, drop' piano figure for 'It's Raining' and made a song out of it. I used to do that all the time. If someone walked into the studio and told me a story about something that just happened, I turned it into a song."

Thus it was that the New Orleans playground rhyme, "Sittin' in la la, waitin' for my ya ya," became "Ya Ya," a Number Seven

decorated with gold albums and autographed photos from McCartney, the Neville Brothers, Dr. John, Patti LaBelle and the others who had worked there. Welcoming me into the recording room, Toussaint proved the epitome of the Southern gentleman. He spoke in the soothing purr of a late-night disc jockey or a luxury-car-advertisement voice-over. His tall, lanky physique was exaggerated by the rounded crown of his afro, and his reassuring smile was framed by a thick, drooping mustache. He moved and talked with a calm deliberation designed to put one at ease.

When he sat down at the ivories to illustrate the tradition of New Orleans piano, however, it soon became obvious that all his nervous energy resided in his hands. He played the wild rhumba beat associated with Professor Longhair, then shifted without a hitch into the hypnotic triplets of Fats Domino. Toussaint next gave quick lessons in the rag-influenced boogie-woogie of Tuts Washington, the blues-influenced boogie-woogie of Smiley Lewis and the bravura cadenzas of James Booker. "I think I'm a little bit of all those people," Toussaint concluded. "I hope so, because they're each so strong in their own right."

Toussaint's amazing ability to mimic whatever pianist he heard won him a job leading the house band at New Orleans's Dew Drop Inn in 1956, when he was only eighteen. Ray Charles lived at the Dew Drop for a while, and entertainers ranging from Duke Ellington to Charles Brown always made it a point to drop by. Before long, the teenage prodigy was playing Fats Domino sessions under producer Dave Bartholomew, subbing for Huey Smith on Earl King tours and recording an instrumental album as Tousan (he wrote such instrumental hits as

pop hit for Lee Dorsey in 1961. Thus it was that Toussaint put a piano hook together with a Henny Youngman joke to create "Mother-in-Law," a Number One smash for Ernie K-Doe in 1961. Thus it was that Toussaint helped Chris Kenner turn the street-slang expression "I Like It Like That" into a Number Two hit that same year.

After a 1963–65 stint in the army, Toussaint returned to New Orleans and picked up where he left off by writing and producing a series of hits for Lee Dorsey: "Ride Your Pony," "Working in the Coal Mine" and "Holy Cow." He walked into a French Quarter nightclub and saw his old production clients, Art and Aaron Neville performing as the Neville Sounds. Toussaint grabbed the rhythm section, renamed them the Meters and turned them into Louisiana's second-line version of Booker T. and the MG's. Not only did the quartet enjoy instrumental hits of their own, but they played recording sessions for the producer on Dr. John's "Right Place, Wrong Time," Paul McCartney & Wings' *Venus and Mars*, Labelle's "Lady Marmalade," the Wild Tchoupitoulas' self-titled debut, as well as for Toussaint himself.

"I once had the attitude that I wasn't a performer," Toussaint told me. "I was a songwriter, arranger and producer, and that was that. As time has gone on, however, people keep asking me to perform, so I've taken it more and more seriously. I do some solo shows, but I prefer performing with a band because my musical life has been built around arrangements for other people."

He has released seven solo albums, which have been more noteworthy for their ingenious craft than their modest vocals. But he has remained active with other projects as well. He wrote out the legendary horn arrangements for the Band's *Rock of Ages* off the top of his head without the help of a horn rehearsal. He appeared with Professor Longhair in the award-winning documentary film *Piano Players Rarely Ever Play Together*. He composed the songs for the 1987 off-Broadway musical *Stagger Lee* starring Ruth Brown. More recently, he cofounded NYNO Records, a new label devoted to homegrown Crescent City talent.

Through it all, Toussaint has kept his miraculous

melodic gift grounded in the funky rhythms and ready-to-party spirit of his native city. This is music so Southern that it seems as much Caribbean as Dixieish. It's the music of tuba bands, crawfish étouffée, plastic Mardi Gras beads, fan palmettos and red beans and rice. His favorite song of all the hundreds he's written, though, is "Southern Nights," the title track of his 1975 album, and a song Glen Campbell turned into BMI's Most Performed Song of 1977.

"That was one of the inspired songs," he proclaimed to me, beaming with satisfaction. "That comes right from my own childhood, from when my mother and father would take us out to visit the old folks in the country. They would speak Creole, and we would sit out on the porch telling ghost stories. A guy would pull a banjo out from under the bed, and there would be music as we watched the fireflies out in the fields. That was a very real song." €



Toussaint, here in 1991, performs frequently at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival

RED BEANS AND ROCK

THE RISE OF NEW ORLEANS ROCK & ROLL

WHERE DO YOU BEGIN TO PICK UP TRACES OF THE HISTORY OF rock & roll in the music of New Orleans? Try starting with the two-fisted pounding of barrelhouse blues piano that dates back to the rough-and-tumble days of the Storyville bawdy houses. Don't forget the jumping rhythms of second-line drumming, a syncopated variation on Nineteenth Century brass band music that has snaked its way down through the decades into countless patterns underlying the American popular music tradition. Add the infusion of Caribbean rhythms that was always a natural element in the heady cultural mix of the most important port city in the Gulf of Mexico. Nail it all down with a tradition of groove-based collective improvisation that had New Orleans groups blasting out rocking rhythms at least as far back as Louis Armstrong's Hot Fives and Sevens. ☞ All New Orleans music shares a character that makes generic distinctions at best beside the point and at worst misleading. This city has traditionally been an artistic refuge throughout the Deep South, at once drawing everything to itself as the center of commerce linking the American agricultural heartland along the Mississippi River with the sea routes of world traders, and at the same

Fats Domino helped to establish the New Orleans sound in 1949 with "The Fat Man"

B Y J O H N S W E N S O N



Let the Good Times

Roll

Shirley & Lee



Shirley & Lee sold a million copies of "Let the Good Times Roll" in 1956

played in traditional New Orleans groups. After World War II Bartholomew led

one of New Orleans's hottest bands, holding court at legendary nightclubs like the Dew Drop Inn and the Caldonia Inn. When Lew Chudd employed Bartholomew to find, hire and produce New Orleans talent for Imperial Records in 1949, Domino was his first choice.

Though Bartholomew had great success with Domino, several terrific records he made with Overton Amos Lemons, a.k.a. Smiley Lewis, failed to catch on. "I Hear You Knockin'," from 1955, was successfully covered right away by Gale Storm, then again in 1970 by British rocker Dave Edmunds. Elvis Presley successfully covered a cleaned-up version of "One Night (of Sin)."

Bartholomew did much better with the teenage couple Shirley & Lee. Leonard Lee and Shirley Goodman were sixteen when the Bartholomew-directed "I'm Gone" introduced them to the public in 1952. The duo went on to sell a million copies of their 1956 hit "Let the Good Times Roll."

In a primitive recording studio in the back of engineer Cosimo Matassa's J&M Record Shop,

time isolating itself from the rest of the politically and religiously oppressive region through its cosmopolitan nature and reputation for moral license.

In other cities where early rock & roll emerged, it has been easier to see the line of demarcation and even to identify the specific influences that define the mythic "shotgun wedding of country and rhythm & blues." But New Orleans rock & roll is musically indistinguishable from New Orleans rhythm & blues. As early as 1947 Roy Brown had recorded the hit single "Good Rockin' Tonight" in New Orleans.

Antoine "Fats" Domino, by far the most popular New Orleans rock & roller in terms of records sold, already had his sound down in 1949 when he recorded the impressive debut single "The Fat Man," a rewrite of the traditional barrelhouse piano standard "Junker's Blues." The rhythmic urgency of Domino's piano playing is in full force here, as is his joyful, shouting vocal, a performance so exciting it leads him to utter exuberant scat choruses.

Domino's identification with New Orleans is total from this first moment – he's "standing on the corner of Rampart and Canal." Domino celebrated the *joie de vivre* of New Orleans life in the Creole French of "Hey! La Bas Boogie," as tenor saxophonist Lee Allen stirs it up with an explosive one-chorus solo inspired by the high-flying energy of Illinois Jacquet. Another early high point is Domino's cover of Professor Longhair's classic "Mardi Gras in New Orleans."

By the time the rest of the nation was recognizing that a rock & roll boom was underway in 1955, Domino was already a veteran presence on the New Orleans scene. His bandleader and arranger Dave Bartholomew rivaled any hitmaker in rock & roll history for his ability to crank out one gem after another using a pool of outstanding session players including a core band comprised of Allen on tenor saxophone, Alvin "Red" Tyler on baritone sax, Earl Palmer on drums, Frank Fields on bass and several different guitarists and keyboardists.

Bartholomew learned to play trumpet from Peter Davis, who also taught Louis Armstrong, and he

Ernie K-Doe hit the big time with the Number One song "Mother-in-Law"

classic 1950s sides for Ace, Minit, Imperial and other labels were made around the clock. It was, in fact, the only studio in New Orleans. The Matassa productions tended to be rhythmically intense with heavily over-amped guitars playing in-unison riffs with the bass and horns, creating a heavy, dance-oriented bottom – a musical style that became known as "the New Orleans sound."

"From about '48 to '56 there were so many sessions being cut in New Orleans there was more work than the cats could handle," recalls Mac Rebennack, a guitar player and session leader on many Matassa studio recordings who went on to solo fame as Dr. John.



"There were sessions going on damn near twenty-four hours a day, six, seven days a week. All the cats you could mention from just about any label from Atlantic to Pacific were cutting in New Orleans."

Henry Roeland "Roy" Byrd, the legendary Professor Longhair, released a series of highly influential singles during the Fifties and early Sixties, including several Atlantic sides (most notably his signature tune "Tipitina") after Ahmet Ertegun and Herb Abramson witnessed his live act at an Algiers juke joint in 1949. Byrd, whose rollicking two-handed style incorporated a heavy rumba backbeat, came out of the New Orleans piano tradition that stretched back to Jelly Roll Morton and left his stamp on all who followed, including Huey "Piano" Smith, Domino, Dr. John and the consummate producer and songwriter Allen Toussaint.

Professor Longhair was also instrumental in fusing the New Orleans R&B/rock & roll tradition with the familiar cadences of the Mardi Gras Indians with his recording of "Big Chief," featuring Earl King on vocals. Robert Parker, the saxophonist in Longhair's group, went on to solo success in the mid-Sixties with "Barefootin'."

Though Longhair's influence runs deep, he was not a well-known national figure during the heyday of New Orleans rock & roll. Little Richard, on the other hand, came bursting out of New Orleans with his own wild take on barrelhouse piano and took the rock & roll world by storm.

Little Richard was only one of several veins of New Orleans gold struck by Specialty Records owner Art Rupe. Rupe scored big on his first visit to New Orleans in 1952 when he discovered the teenage Lloyd Price singing "Lawdy Miss Clawdy." With Fats Domino sitting in on piano, the J&M Studio recording of "Lawdy Miss Clawdy" topped the R&B charts and sold a million records. Price was drafted in 1953 and never repeated that success with Specialty, though he went on to record several rock-era hits with other companies, including "Just Because," "Stagger Lee" and "Personality."

Rupe cashed in again with the glorious 1954 hit by Eddie "Guitar Slim" Jones, "The Things That I Used to Do," which became another million-seller. But the Little Richard sessions for Specialty identified the magic of the New Orleans sound once and for all.

Richard Penniman had already recorded unsuccessfully when Rupe sent him to New Orleans with A&R rep Robert "Bumps" Blackwell to cut some tracks with the J&M "clique" in September 1955. The session included the Palmer/Fields rhythm section, Tyler and Allen on horns, Justin Adams on guitar and most likely Huey Smith on piano. During a session break, Little Richard was fooling around on the piano, playing a raunchy version of what would become "Tutti-Frutti." A local songwriter who happened to be



there penned some cleaned-up lyrics for "Tutti-Frutti," the song that launched the career of one of the original rock & rollers. The list of tracks

Professor Longhair, here in 1973, began recording in the Fifties

Richard went on to cut in New Orleans with the clique is a virtual greatest-hits package: "Long Tall Sally," "Slippin' and Slidin'," "Rip It Up," "Ready Teddy," "The Girl Can't Help It," "Jenny Jenny" and "Good Golly Miss Molly" are just some of the titles.

The Chicago-based Chess Records also mined New Orleans gold through the influence of local A&R rep Paul Gayten, who recorded on his own but struck paydirt in 1957 with a catchy novelty song about a frog and a homeless girl, "Ain't Got No Home," by Clarence "Frog Man" Henry. Gayten also recorded Bobby Charles, whose "Later Alligator" was adapted into the Bill Haley and the Comets hit "See You Later, Alligator."

When Specialty talent scout Johnny Vincent left to form his own company, Ace, taking several Specialty artists with him, the New Orleans sound had its first local record company. Earl



King's "Those Lonely, Lonely Nights," the first hit for the fledgling label, was released in 1955 and eventually sold 250,000 copies.

Among the most legendary Ace groups was Huey "Piano" Smith and the Clowns. Smith was a local session player with a long list of credits to his name when he scored his first hit as a leader with "Rockin' Pneumonia and the Boogie Woogie Flu" in 1957. Smith's star potential was limited because he did not sing on his records – Bobby Marchan is the vocalist on "Rockin' Pneumonia" – but the Clowns had their biggest success in 1958 with the two-sided hit "Don't You Just Know It" and "High Blood Pressure." Smith went on to record with limited success for Imperial, but hit the charts again upon his return to Ace with the dance craze-inspired "Pop-Eye."

Ace ventured into the pop world with the teenage-oriented Jimmy Clanton, a precursor to one of the label's biggest hits, Frankie Ford's 1959 classic "Sea Cruise." The driving single, which hit Number Fourteen on the pop chart, was in fact a Huey "Piano" Smith backing track with Ford singing over it.

Ace also had minor hits with Joe Tex and Eddie Bo. Bo, another in the long line of piano-playing "professors," recorded for a variety of labels and ran sessions around New Orleans. His legendary live performances continue today in a regular stand at Margaritaville in the French Quarter and annual shows at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. Bo's best-known recording, "Check Mr. Popeye," helped popularize the New Orleans dance movement in the early 1960s. Recorded for the local New Orleans label Ric Records, "Check Mr. Popeye" received national attention after it was licensed to the Philadelphia-based Swan Records.

Ric, which along with its sister label, Ron Records, was owned by former Ace associate Joe Ruffino, recorded a number of other local New Orleans artists including Professor Longhair and Irma Thomas, but the label's biggest hit was the irresistible Joe Jones recording of "You Talk Too Much," which made it to Number Three on the national charts in 1960 after Roulette Records took over its manufacture, distribution and promotion.

When New Orleans distributor Joe Banashak formed his own label, Minit Records, in 1960, he turned to a young protégé of Bartholomew's, Allen Toussaint, to run his productions. Bartholomew had discovered Toussaint during jam sessions at the Dew Drop Inn and had used Toussaint as the pianist on sessions when Fats Domino was on the road and unavailable to record.

Toussaint, a brilliant writer and arranger as well as a gifted keyboardist, brought the new label into the charts quickly with the 1960 hit "Ooh Poo Pah Doo," a riotous outing by former Professor Longhair drummer Jessie Hill. In 1961 Toussaint worked his magic again,

Georgia native Little Richard struck gold in the Crescent City



transforming the journeyman New Orleans singer Ernest Kador into the best-selling Ernie K-Doe, whose smash hit "Mother-in-Law" soared to Number One after it was leased for distribution to Imperial.

With Imperial distributing Minit, Banashak formed another label, Instant, with Toussaint again handling the sessions. This imprint became synonymous with a series of terrific recordings by Chris Kenner. Kenner's "I Like It Like That" became a Number Two hit in 1961. After scoring with the regional hit "Something You Got," Kenner had another national hit in 1963 with "Land of 1,000 Dances." Though Kenner's original topped out at Number Seventy-seven on the charts, it went on to be an oft-covered song and a hit for Cannibal and the Headhunters.

Lee Dorsey was another Toussaint-produced artist on Instant, but it wasn't until Fire/Fury Records president Bobby Robinson signed Dorsey that he finally put together a hit. Toussaint worked behind the scenes with Robinson and Dorsey on "Ya Ya," which became a million-seller in 1961.

The impact of the Beatles on the American pop music industry in 1963 hit the New Orleans music scene like a killer hurricane. Imperial closed up shop and Bartholomew scaled back his schedule. Toussaint went into the army, and by the time he returned to the scene found that many of the New Orleans session stalwarts had moved to Los Angeles. A golden age had passed, but not without casting a very long shadow. €

Lloyd Price, a 1998 Hall of Fame inductee, was one of New Orleans's first stars